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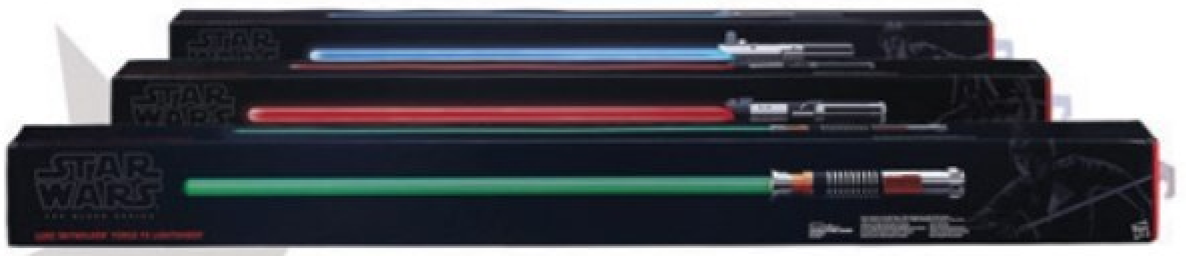
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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

Lead The Marketplace, Don't Follow It

It's easy to be angry at Electronic Arts for shutting down Visceral Games and halting creation of the "story-based, linear adventure game" in the Star Wars universe the studio was working on (see page 12 for more). In a blog post from EA's Patrick Söderlund, the company blames "market conditions" and cites feedback from players about "how they want to play."

Those reasons are just a few among many possible factors. Maybe the game was bad. Maybe the game was great, and EA decided that gamers didn't want what Visceral was creating. Maybe it's only about money, and EA wants to retool the game to make it more profitable in the long term.

Whatever the actual reasons, EA's statement certainly points to saying that gamers don't want linear, story-based games (though the success of games like Tomb Raider and The Last of Us tells a different tale, because people sure weren't buying those for the multiplayer). Perhaps EA doesn't want that – or at least assumes the market wouldn't support it. I know I want those experiences, but gamers often want all games to be all things. If you asked me to design my dream game, I would try to make Grand Theft Auto V, Skyrim, World of Warcraft, and Destiny 2 all rolled into one.

But that game is impossible to make, and trying to meet gamers' perceived (and sometimes irrational) demands isn't always the right move. Time and time again, I have seen binary analysis of "what gamers want" from game companies that are proven wrong.

What gamers want is great games. Yes, there are great games that fail, but if you find a design and a team that can execute, I think any game type can thrive. I'm sad to see Electronic Arts move away from this Star Wars experience, because I wanted to play it. Give me great experiences, and I'll play your game regardless of what the marketplace says is hot.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

1217

40 Monster Hunter: World

The latest Monster Hunter game is an ambitious attempt to open up the series to new players while maintaining the depth fans love. We traveled to Capcom's offices in Osaka and played the game for nearly 10 hours. Is it successful? Check out our in-depth impressions inside. ***by Jeff Cork***

08 SNES Classic Edition Review

Nintendo’s adorable collection of plug-and-play SNES games is here, but is it worth all the trouble it takes to track one down?

28 2017 Holiday Buying Guide

Another holiday season is upon us, which means it’s time to buy gifts for people, and for people to buy gifts for you. Here are some suggestions for either situation.

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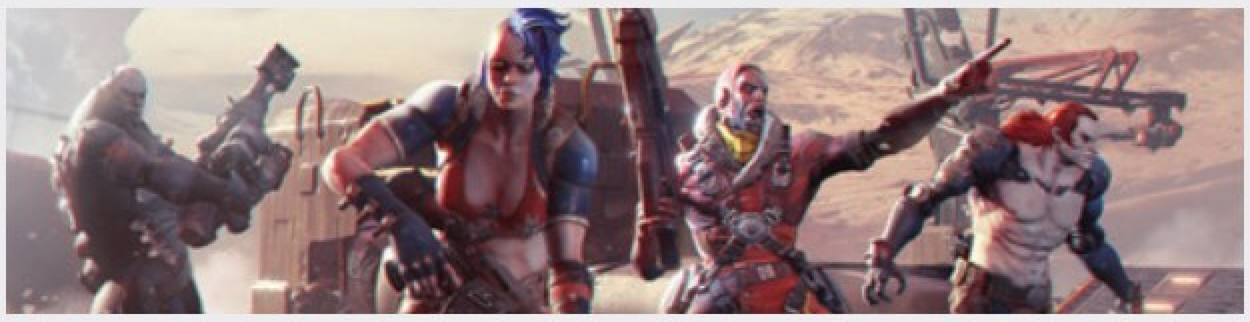
It may not feel like Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, but Shadow of War contains a Middle-earth worth visiting.



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We visited Spain to learn all about MercurySteam (the studio behind Castlevania: Lords of Shadow and Metroid: Samus Returns) as it launched an original self-published project, Raiders of the Broken Planet.

52 Sailing In The Sea Of Thieves

We went to Rare’s headquarters in England to check in on its highly social open-world pirate game.

58 Exploring Xenoblade Chronicles 2

We spent a ton of time with Switch’s most anticipated game that isn’t called Super Mario Odyssey.

66 Red Dead Redemption II

Rockstar is still tight-lipped about its cowboy sequel, but we now know a few crucial story details.

68 World Of Warcraft: Battle For Azeroth

After 13 years of high-fantasy adventure, World of Warcraft is still going strong, and the future looks bright.

84 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus

MachineGames takes another stab at the classic first-person shooter series. Find out why the sequel succeeds here.

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Nintendo has set a high standard for itself with Switch. Does Mario meet those expectations?

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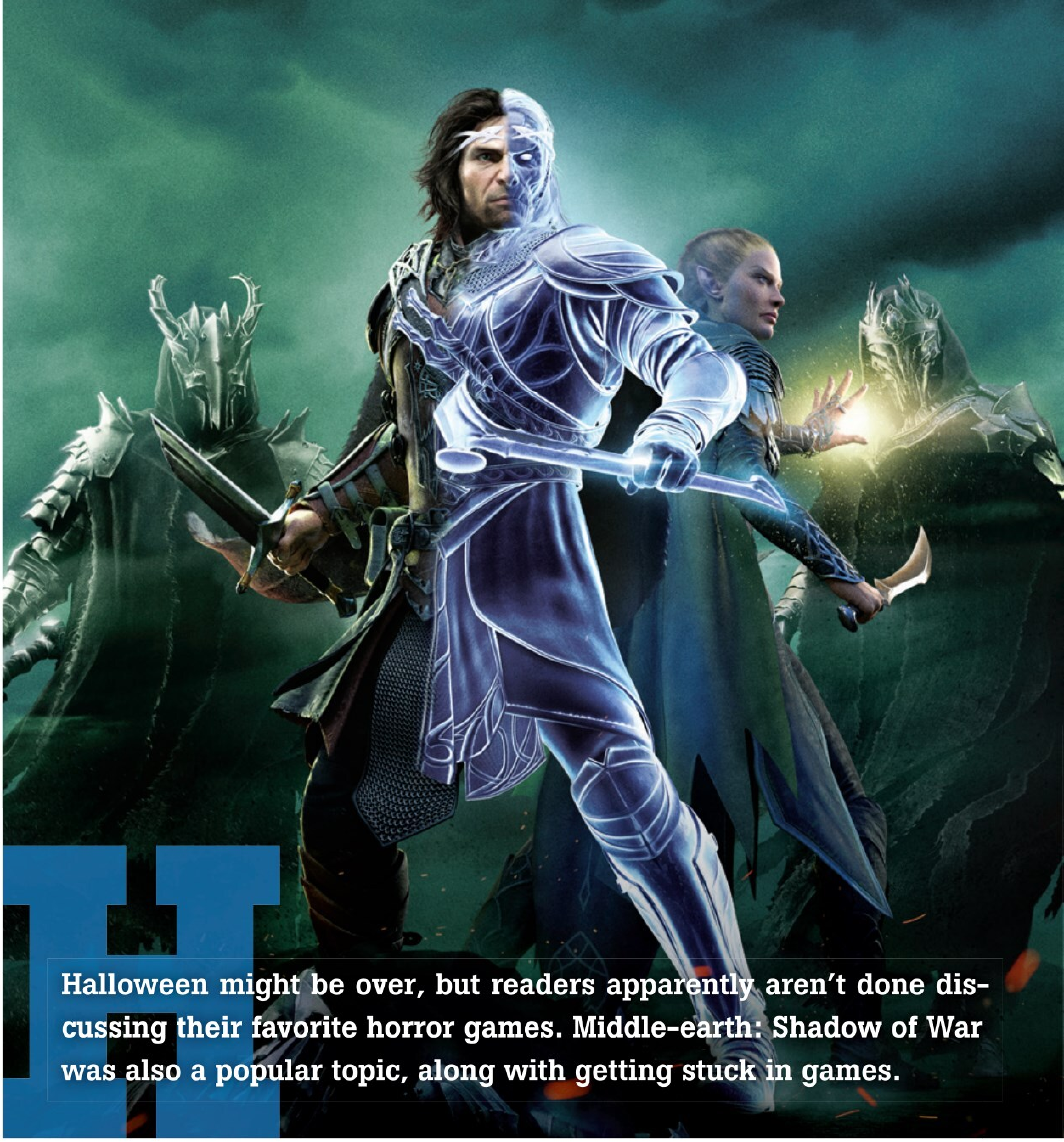
feedback



Halloween might be over, but readers apparently aren't done discussing their favorite horror games. Middle-earth: Shadow of War was also a popular topic, along with getting stuck in games.

Out Of The Shadows

I just wanted to let your staff (especially writer Matt Miller) know how awesome your cover story on Middle-earth: Shadow of War was (issue 294). I've always been a massive Tolkien nerd and the first game from Monolith was incredible, so I was obviously stoked to see the story continue. After reading Miller's in-depth description and experience playing it, I'm absolutely over the moon. Thanks for covering this game so well!

Nicole Evans
via email

If you like Monolith's take on Middle-earth, you're in luck. Not only can you learn more about the development of the game by heading to www.gameinformer.com/shadowofwar, you can see how it all turned out by reading our review on page 78. How's that for informative?

Love Is Blind

I know I'm a little late to the party with this one, but I recently picked up the latest Doom and I would like to give my sincere thanks to Bethesda and id for offering comprehensive adjustment options for colorblind players. There are some games I simply can't play due to my colorblindness (like Call of Duty's multiplayer) because of all the camouflage; all someone has to do to frag me is stand still and I'll run right past them. Other games offer a colorblind mode but don't change anything in-game for me (I'm looking at you, Rocket League!). Doom's colorblind options make it so much easier to see details in the environment that help me find collectibles and differentiate the baddies that are coming for my head! I know I'm in a gaming minority, but I want Bethesda and id to know how much that little addition means to players like me.

Mark Harris
Amarillo, TX

Accommodating colorblind players is a tricky challenge. Case in point: While Doom's accessibility options have done wonders for some players like Mark, others have complained that the full-screen filters are ineffective. Much of this can be attributed to the different types and severities of colorblindness that players suffer from, which makes user feedback all the more vital for developers and publishers. Ultimately, we're happy to see companies taking the issue more seriously.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Game Over?

Hello, I've been reading your magazine for several years now, and I have a problem. It seems that over the years I've become disillusioned with gaming. I mean, I still go out and buy the hot new game when it's released, but some I hardly play and most I never finish. I've been a gamer all my life, yet I haven't found much joy in gaming in the recent years. Not since the GameCube/PS2 era. I think this is because games were simple back then – games were games. I feel that games today have too many gimmicks: motion controls, 4K, 3D, VR, touchscreens, HD remakes. Most of the games are the same exact games that come out every year; they crank out a new Assassin's Creed game or Call of Duty that's basically the same as last year's game. Maybe I'm just an old-timer stuck in the past, but I wish games were simple and fun again. Maybe it's time to put away my controller for good.

Kyle Dunn
via email

We're not sure that Assassin's Creed (which is coming off of a hiatus and taking players to Egypt in Origins) and Call of Duty (which is eschewing the near-future setting of recent entries for World War II) are the best examples of the "same exact game every year" argument that critics love to bandy about. Regardless, people do sometimes grow out of hobbies. If nothing from this year's slate of great games excites you, can always just stick to the classics.

Stuck On You

I loved your article about getting stuck in video games (The Science of Stuck, issue 294). I have noticed myself getting stuck in games much more frequently lately. Reading this article really helped open my eyes as to why it is happening and how I can fix it. It even gave me deeper insight into my life as an adult outside of video games.

Chayce Haines
via email

Suriel Vazquez's "The Science of Stuck" article might as well have been called "Here's Four Pages About You, Benny." Getting stuck and frustrated is my biggest issue in video games. I often end up either resorting to a game guide or giving up on the game for months, at which point I have to start over because I can't remember what was going on. The number of games I have completed is not large. Normally I feel like a big stupid loser when I get stuck, but this article made me realize that it's normal. I've been subscribed to G.I. since 2011, but I've never read an article that connected with me so deeply.

Benny Imperion
via email

Based on the number of readers who wrote in with praise for Suriel's article, it appears everyone can relate to the frustration of getting stuck in a game. Well, except us. We're infallible. Obviously.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Who exactly is excited for the new Xbox One X?"

Microsoft, Microsoft's accountants, Microsoft's shareholders…

"Whatever happened to the Endless Ocean series?"

It ended.

"Why call out PewDiePie for using a racial slur when so many others in the online community do too?"

Your question answers itself.

Reader Gibberish:

"What is best buy a game or download a game on your devise?"

Question Of The Month:

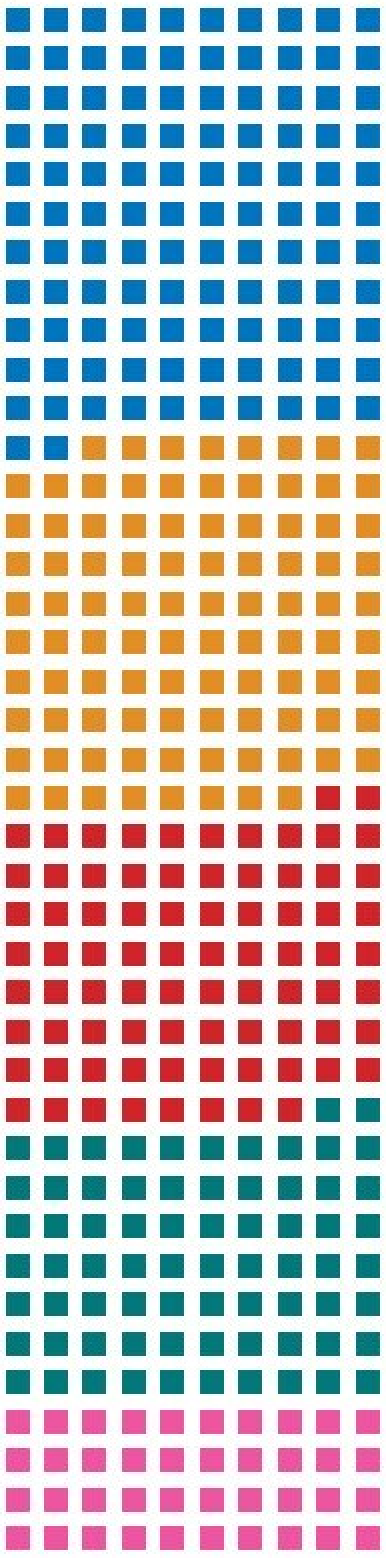
What's your favorite video game monster and why?

gi spy

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) This month we flew to Osaka, Japan to learn all about Monster Hunter World from director Kaname Fujioka and lead designer Yuya Tokuda. We also learned a thing or two about pantomiming game titles. **(Right)** Kim met with Dragon Quest producers Yuu Miyake and Hokuto Okamato during this year's Tokyo Game Show.

On Your Mind



- 🟦 The Science Of Stuck Supporters
- 🟧 Shadow Of Morewardor Fans
- 🟥 Call Of Duty Doters
- 🟩 Fondness Forgetters (Sorry)
- 🟪 "Where Are All The Switch Games?"

Get Over It

In issue 294, we asked readers what game do fans remember too fondly. The answers may surprise you. Well, except for one. You can probably guess what it is.

I cast my vote against the Baldur's Gate games, the original especially. I love Dungeons & Dragons, and I love CRPGs – but slapping a tabletop combat system on a game with a super half-baked narrative was a total recipe for disaster. And Imoen may just be the actual worst companion ever in a video game.

Ryan Dakin

Majora's Mask. There's a lot to love about the game, but it's all buried under baffling design decisions that turn playing into a chore. Who thought it was a fun idea to reset my progress whenever I save? That's exactly what saving is supposed to prevent! I think the game is mainly popular for its "dark" story, but there are plenty of other games (even in the Zelda series) that do it better.

David Otto

Sonic The Hedgehog. Brian Shea might disagree, but I think deep down even he knows it's remembered a little too fondly.

Josh Karmel

T.G.I.F.

Against my better judgement and despite the 6 that G.I. scored it, I downloaded Friday The 13th. My wife and I are huge fans of the franchise and I love horror games and films. I couldn't resist. While the glitch-filled mechanics, clunky controls, and matchmaking delays are unbearable at times, I spent the majority of a day playing this gem. Illfonic definitely has work to do to refine this game, but I am confident they will and I will continue to enjoy it as I scream obscenities either at the waiting times, Jason, or the toxic players in the game. Keep up the great work!

Dusty Woodard
Texas

There certainly is a spark of magic in Illfonic's take on the storied horror series, and while that doesn't excuse Friday The 13th's myriad problems, we do hope the developer can continue to improve the experience.

The Horror…

So I'm looking at your best horror games article (Fright Factor, issue 294), and I see a glaring omission: absolutely no mention of Dead Space. Do I even need to explain why it should be included? Dead Space makes the original Resident Evil look as scary as a bunny rabbit. I mean, come on: It has blood and gore and psychological thrills. The original Dead Space is the most immersive game I have ever played. There's absolutely no reason it should not be on that list – I don't care if it's nearly 10 years old.

Mike Bruno
via email

The original Dead Space is indeed a masterpiece of the horror genre. There's just one problem: The article was about modern horror games that you can play on current-gen consoles, and – against all logic – EA hasn't shown any interest in releasing an HD remaster of the game. Talk about horrific!

NINTENDO 3DS
METROID

(Left) Kim also caught up with Suda 51 and Nobutaka Ichiki to discuss The 25th War: The Silver Case. **(Right)** We sent Kyle to personally thank Metroid Samus Returns producer Yoshio Sakamoto and director José Luis Márquez for making another 2D Metroid game.

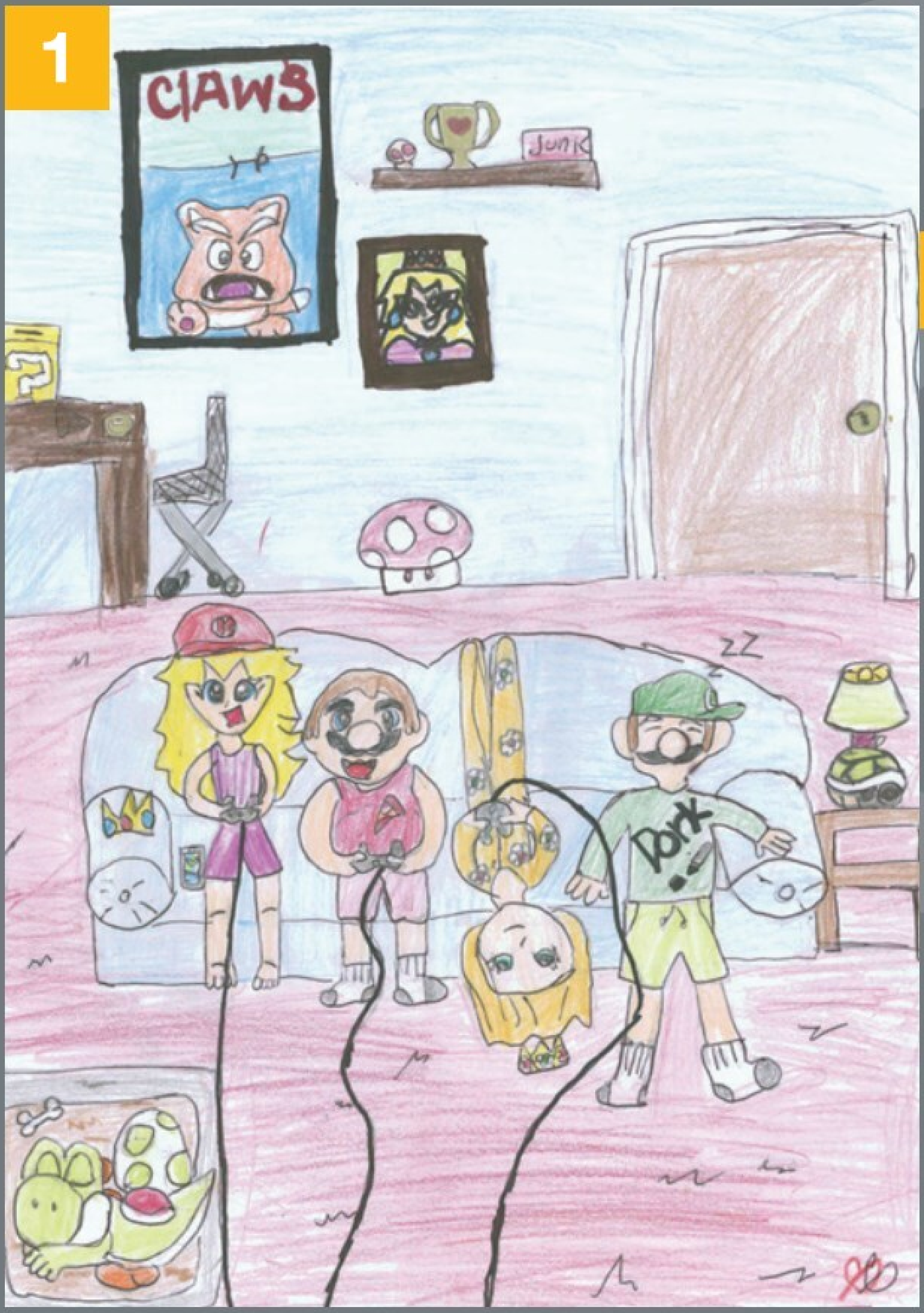
WINNER

1 Celeste Burkeen
Even at age 12, Celeste knows that Luigi is a big dork. Marvelous.

2 David Ingersoll
There's a lot more to Shy Guy than first meets the eye.

3 Harmony Ellender
Harmony's psychedelic watercolors would make perfect *sense in Abzû.*

4 Jason Liccardi
Face it, Link: Not everything's about you… #NotMyLegend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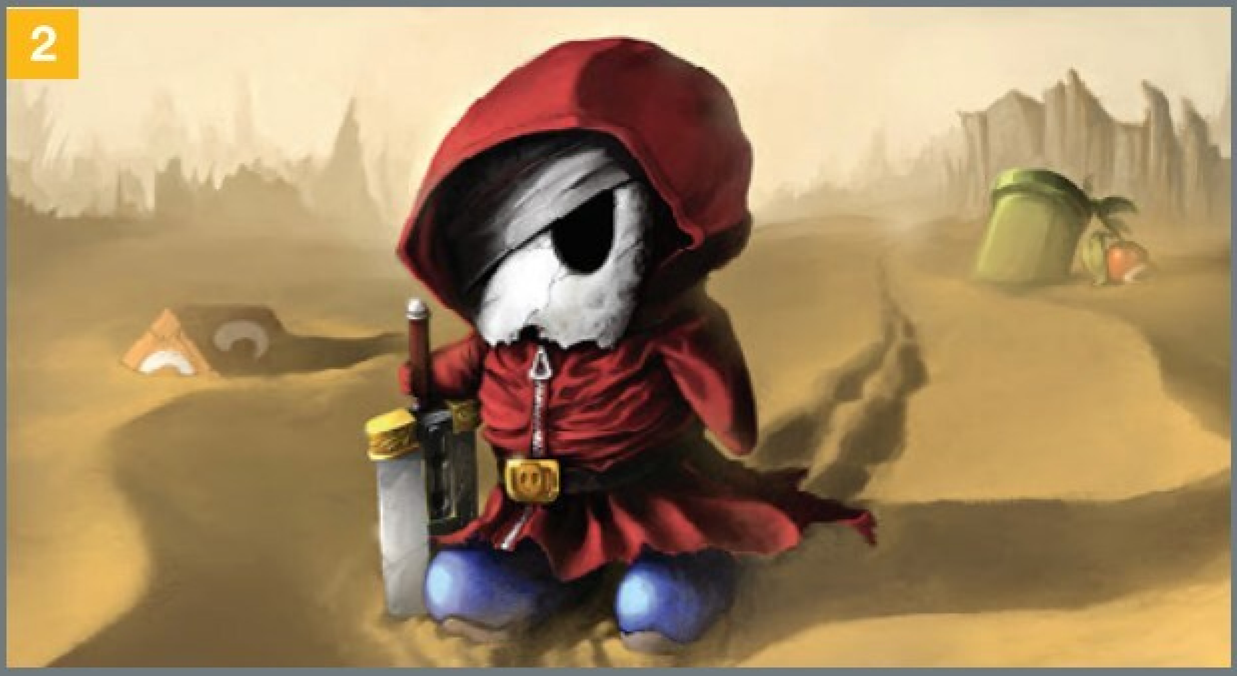
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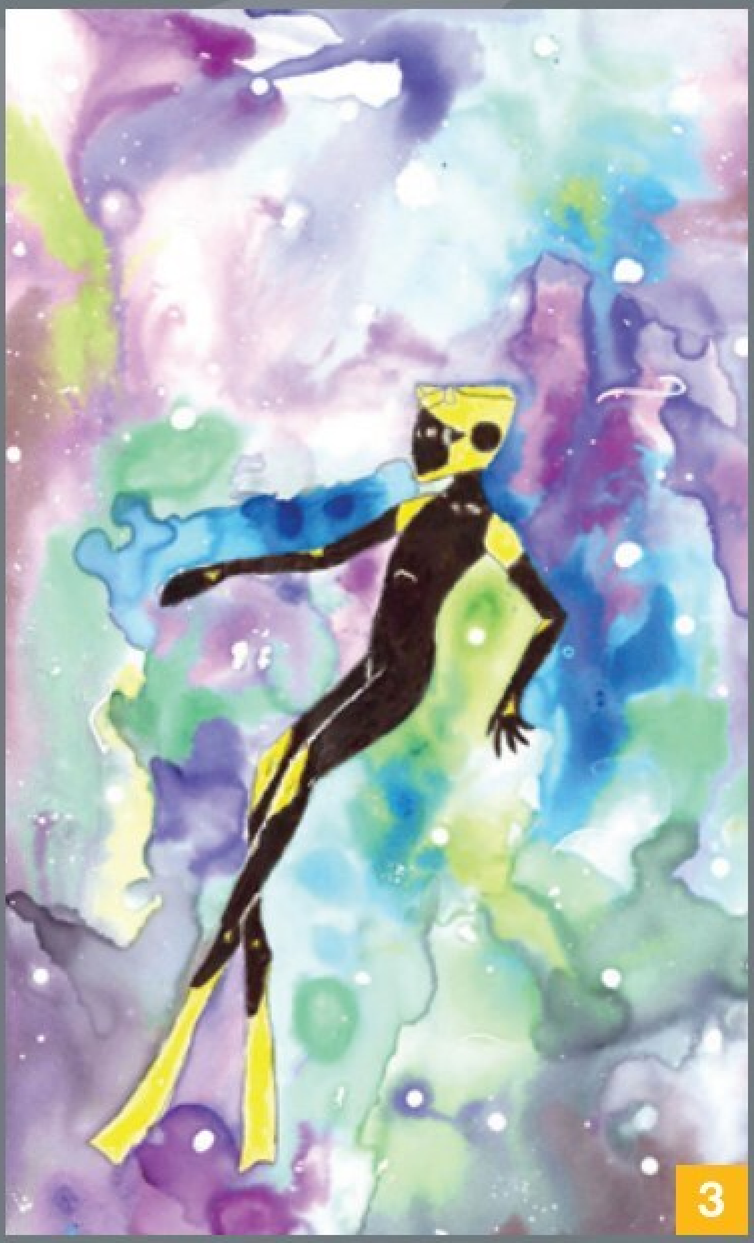
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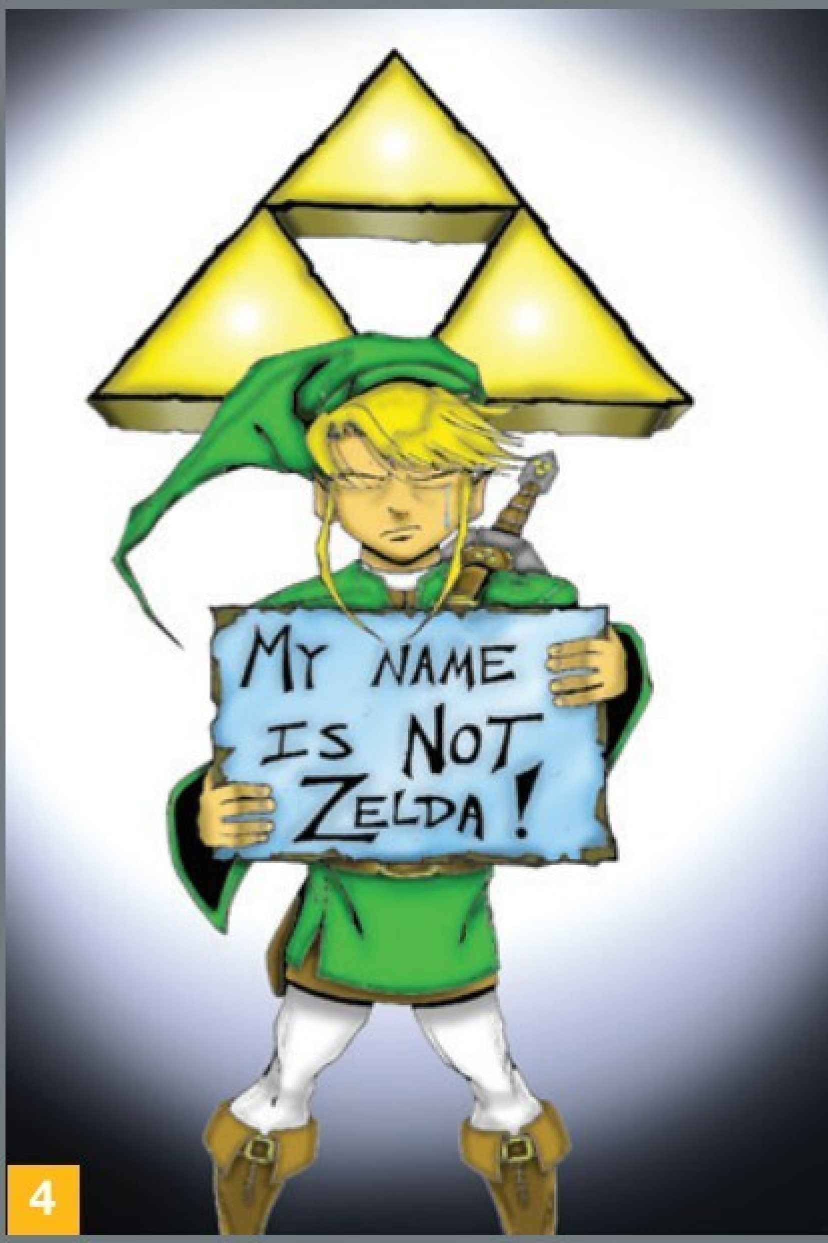
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(Left) Suriel visited Japan's Takao Trick Art Museum during our Dragon Ball FighterZ cover story trip last month, and we haven't seen him since. **(Right)** The Trail Blazers' Damian Lillard was on hand at a recent NBA 2K18 event. He's better at real basketball than we are at fake basketball.

SNES
Classic Edition

SUPER NINTENDO
POWER
RESET
EJECT

HARDWARE REVIEW

NOTABLES

14 impulse

16 top 10 licensed music moments

18 full steam ahead: mercurysteam's crazy journey, from scrapland to samus – and beyond

24 gamer – drawing light and darkness

28 holiday buying guide

The Super Nintendo holds a special place in gaming history. Though many franchises got started on the original NES, the 16-bit era allowed developers to expand their scope and refine their vision for series like Super Mario, Zelda, Metroid, Final Fantasy, and Mega Man. Some of the most enduring and iconic games released on the SNES, and Nintendo's latest plug-and-play device has the potential to transport you back to the glory days.

by Joe Juba

After the runaway success of the NES Classic Edition, Nintendo tapping into its prestigious library of 16-bit classics was practically guaranteed. But does the SNES Classic Edition deliver on its promise? Has Nintendo worked out the kinks from last year? Yes and no, respectively.

The SNES Classic Edition is a compact, offline, all-in-one system that lets you play 20 games that originally came out on the Super Nintendo, and one that was developed for the system but never released (Star Fox 2). Everything you need to get started comes in the package. You get the SNES Classic Edition, two controllers, an HDMI cable, a poster, a power cord, and set-up instructions. Getting the system up and running is quick and easy; the unit comes pre-loaded with all of the games, so you don't need worry about any installation or configuration beyond selecting your preferred language.

If you have the NES Classic Edition, this is pretty much the same song and dance. Apart from the actual game selection, the biggest difference here is the inclusion of the second controller. That's a big improvement, since it lets you take advantage of the many games with two-player support without having to make an additional purchase. Even though it makes the base unit more expensive (the SNES Classic Edition is $80, compared to $60 for the NES Classic Edition), having everything you need right out of the box is a big benefit.

The unit itself is a compact and cute facsimile of the original SNES, but the games are the main attraction for any system, even nostalgic throwback consoles. On that front, the SNES Classic delivers many must-play favorites; Final Fantasy VI (aka III), Super Metroid, F-Zero, and Mega Man X hold particularly dear places in my heart. With a wide selection of amazing titles, the SNES Classic Edition has a little fragment of unforgettable gaming history for everyone.

Mega Man X

The great selection of games was also the main advantage of the NES Classic Edition, but the point deserves special emphasis for the SNES Classic Edition. Even with fewer games (21 total, compared to 30 on the NES Classic Edition), this collection feels more curated, with uniformly higher-quality options.

Of course, everyone has different tastes, but I was drawn into longer play sessions on the SNES Classic Edition. It offers fewer arcade-style titles and more complex content – games that build on the concepts on their more primitive precursors. For example, the original Legend of Zelda on NES may have started it all, but A Link to the Past is just more fun and interesting. The first Final Fantasy may have been important, but it doesn't have the same narrative pull as RPGs like Final Fantasy III, Earthbound, Secret of Mana, and Super Mario RPG – all of which are included here. In short, the NES Classic Edition had excellent games, and the SNES Classic Edition's library is even better, despite being smaller.

Great games aside, this system is not perfect. It has most of the same problems that plagued the NES Classic Edition, and they aren't exactly minor. The length of the cords on the controllers (a big problem with the NES Classic Edition) has been increased to 4.5 feet from about 2.5 feet, but that still isn't long enough to facilitate convenient gaming. I had to pull a chair uncomfortably close to the TV in my living room, and experienced a moment of dread as one of my dogs came perilously close to catching the cord and yanking the system off the ledge. Though Nintendo clearly heard the complaints about this issue, the company didn't take sufficient

A Note About Star Fox 2

Star Fox 2 was originally scheduled to release in 1995, but was canceled after development had already completed. The SNES Classic Edition lets you play this unreleased game for the first time officially, which is cool. On the other hand, maybe it was canceled for a reason; Star Fox 2 is not a long-lost masterpiece. It's strange, short, and rough around the edges – almost like a prototype. That makes it interesting from a historical perspective (and an excellent bonus for Star Fox fans), but Star Fox 2 is more of a curiosity than a destination.

STARFOX 2
TM
©1996 Nintendo

The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past

Don't tease the octopus, kids!

Ultros

EDGAR 178
SABIN 231
TERRA 151
BANON 142

Final Fantasy III

measures to fix it. The whole "playing a game while huddled around the TV" situation might work for some, but it doesn't make sense in the current gaming landscape.

I'm also annoyed that the Super NES Classic Edition still has no native option for returning to the menu screen. This is where you select games, store save states, and use the new rewind feature. Needless to say, all of these functions are pillars of the SNES Classic Edition experience, so it's a bother to constantly have to physically nudge the "reset" button on the system. As if the short cords weren't bad enough, using the software seems to require that you stay in close proximity. I know it may not seem like a big deal, especially if you just want to boot up a game and play nonstop for an hour or two. But if you're using the rewind option to beat a hard boss, or if you just want to try a bunch of games for a few minutes, the frequent interruptions break up the momentum and make it harder to dig in.

Here's the good news: You can fix these problems. Other wired Nintendo controllers that have a "home" button (like the Wii Classic Controller I tested) can take you back to the menu screen, which drastically improves your ability to get the most out of the system. That doesn't solve the cord problem, though; for that, you need to invest in extention cables or third-party wireless options (which may also have "home" buttons). With the ability to sit a reasonable distance back from your TV and return to the menu screens, these options represent the best way to play the SNES Classic Edition. However, Nintendo seriously screwed up by making gamers turn to additional accessories to truly take advantage of its new device.

Ultimately, pointing out problems with the SNES Classic Edition feels a bit like standing in front of a speeding locomotive and feebly waving your arms to make it stop. The commercial success of the SNES Classic Edition seems inevitable; last year, the NES Classic Edition demonstrated that no drawbacks or complaints are likely to deter fans who are excited about the product. That phenomenal response must have been affirming for Nintendo, because apart from packing in a second controller, the company passed up every opportunity to make the gaming experience on the SNES Classic Edition more intuitive and flexible.

Baffling and frustrating issues still persist, especially with regards to how poorly the device aligns with modern entertainment setups. Short cords and the lack of a menu-screen shortcut are disappointing, and you shouldn't have to purchase additional accessories to work around them (though you can). But do these problems make the SNES Classic Edition a waste of time or money? Not at all. The framework surrounding these fantastic games leaves a lot to be desired, but you shouldn't pass on the opportunity to have so many amazing titles at your fingertips.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$79.99
nintendo.com/super-nes-classic

The Games

- Contra III: The Alien Wars
- Donkey Kong Country
- Earthbound
- F-Zero
- Final Fantasy III
- Kirby Super Star
- Kirby's Dream Course
- The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past
- Mega Man X
- Secret of Mana
- Star Fox
- Star Fox 2
- Street Fighter II Turbo
- Super Castlevania IV
- Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts• Super Mario Kart
- Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars
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TEEN T ESRB — Suggestive Themes, Violence

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The Good

OCULUS VR announced the Oculus Go headset starting at $199 (shown) for release early next year. Not only is it $200 cheaper than the regular Rift headset, but it's a standalone unit that doesn't need to be hooked into a PC. It remains to be seen, however, what the gaming and other experiences will be like on the Go.

Speaking of the Rift headset, it's now selling for $399 (a drop of $100), complete with the headset, two sensors, Touch controllers, and some games. Hopefully this jumpstarts sales and developer involvement with the medium.

The Bad

ELECTRONIC ARTS shut down Visceral Games and announced that the internal studio's upcoming single-player, linear, story-based Star Wars title is being overhauled and given to sports studio EA Vancouver. "It has become clear that to deliver an experience that players will want to come back to and enjoy for a long time to come," wrote EA executive vice president Patrick Söderlund in a blog post, "we needed to pivot the design." Söderlund's quote seems to point to the title shifting towards the game-as-service model like EA's Star Wars: Battlefront series.

Söderlund says that the project – which now has a new, unannounced release timeframe – will deliver "a Star Wars adventure of greater depth and breadth to explore," but how much of the original story is still intact and to what extent it embraces in-game monetization is unknown.

The Ugly

ACTIVISION was recently awarded a patent originally filed in 2015 for a matchmaking engine to drive microtransactions in games in two ways. The first is by putting players who have purchased a weapon, for example, in situations that would give the player "an impression that the particular weapon was a good purchase." The other is by matching a skilled player with a microtransaction with a junior player without the item so that the latter "may be encouraged to make game-related purchases such as a rifle or other item used by the marquee player." Activision says the system has not been implemented in-game.

Quotable

"While there's an element of chance in these mechanics, the player is always guaranteed to receive in-game content (even if the player unfortunately receives something they don't want)."

Industry ratings board the ESRB says that loot boxes are not gambling, and therefore titles with them shouldn't be classified as Adults Only.

NINTENDO SWITCH
AVAILABLE NOW
The Elder Scrolls V
SKYRIM
Bethesda
PLAY THE LEGENDARY OPEN-WORLD ADVENTURE. ANYWHERE.
MATURE 17+
M
ESRB
NINTENDO SWITCH
Nintendo

The open-world adventure from Bethesda Game Studios, where you can virtually be anyone and do anything, now allows you to go anywhere with the Nintendo Switch console. New features include motion controls, gear based on the Legend of Zelda™ series, and amiibo™ compatibility.

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Use of Alcohol

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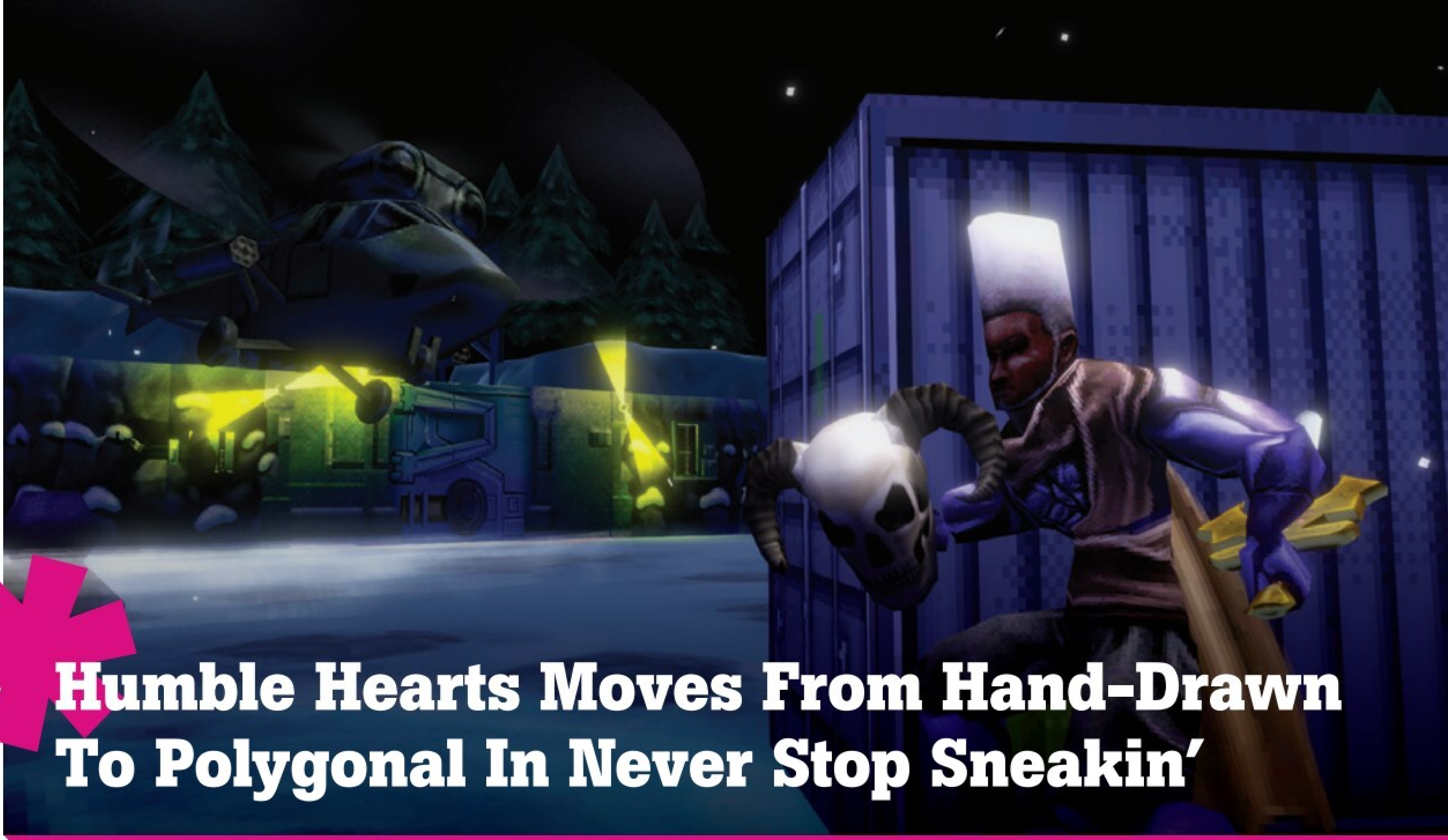

Humble Hearts Moves From Hand-Drawn To Polygonal In Never Stop Sneakin'

One of the hidden gems of 2012, Dust: An Elysian Tail was a beautiful side-scrolling action game of anthropomorphic animals, taut combat, and breathtaking fantasy landscapes. The title was made by Humble Hearts, a studio that is primarily the work of the multi-talented Dean Dodrill. After such a striking and sumptuous hand-drawn aesthetic, many fans have eagerly waited for the next project from Humble Hearts. **Never Stop Sneakin'** certainly defies expectations – a polygonal homage and parody of PlayStation-era graphics, Metal Gear-style stealth, and arcade action. ***by Matt Miller***

"It's definitely more of an action game, but with stealth rules applied," Dodrill says. "We don't want players to be inching their way through levels. We want them skirting the razor's edge around enemy vision cones trying to keep their combo up. We want them making a split-second decision whether to take the long way around a pair of surveillance cameras or use their last EMP to blow them up."

The resulting gameplay nods to the old top-down Metal Gear games, and draws from the polygon counts of the PS1-era Metal Gear Solid, but Dodrill and lead writer Alex Kain are aiming for something significantly more action-packed. Glimpses of the game in action reveal constant movement, clipping along with the pace of a twin-stick shooter rather than a classic stealth title.

The story backdrop is more than a little silly, gently prodding the games that inspired it. A time-traveling villain named Amadeus Guildenstern has kidnapped every U.S. president throughout history, and as an agent of the secretive Department of Sneakin', you've been sent to infiltrate his base and save the day (by building your own time machine). Bad guys include a sniper named Longshot Dangerous, a submarine captain named Captain "Seadog" Cornelius, and Vice President Helicopter – an actual helicopter. The game doesn't seem terribly interested in subtle jokes.

Instead, the focus is on juggling two distinct styles of play. "There's the actual sneaking, where you infiltrate Guildenstern's facility and collect intel and complete mission objectives, and then there's the base-building element, where you use collected intel to build up your Sneakin' HQ," Dodrill says. When moving through the action sequences, players collect a currency called "espionage," as well as rescue captured prisoners and fighting bosses. "My vision of stealth is less about hiding behind corners and waiting for guards to turn around and more about building a sense of flow," Dodrill says. "Kill an enemy and you'll start building up a combo, increasing the value of any intel you find. But if you wait too long, the combo expires. So you start building up a strong combo and you start moving a little quicker."

Even a brief look at the game shows off how different it is from Humble Hearts' previous work, and it's impossible to avoid the connections to the famous Kojima-helmed series. "Hopefully it's pretty clear from the trailer that Alex and I love the Metal Gear series, especially when it comes to its gonzo plotlines and memorable characters," Dodrill says. "But while elements of Never Stop Sneakin' are inspired by Metal Gear Solid, it's equally inspired by that whole era of gaming." From the more modern era, Dodrill cites inspirations like Spelunky and The Binding of Isaac. "Never Stop Sneakin' is obviously a lot different – there's a linear storyline and you don't lose progress when you die, for example – but we wanted to capture that feeling of surprise and improvisation you get from these kinds of games," he says.

Unlike the complex combos and button presses of Dust, Never Stop Sneakin' aims for a pared-down control scheme. The entire game can be played with a single thumbstick. Humble Hearts plans to debut the game on Switch, where the game is also playable purely on the touchscreen. "The Switch is actually the perfect platform for NSS to debut on," Dodrill says. "There's something about the bite-sized nature of infiltrating bases that just feels right on the device." After that, the plan is to begin moving the game to other platforms over time.

Humble Hearts hopes to release Never Stop Sneakin' before the end of the year, but Dodrill admits that they've still got a lot to do before he's happy with the final product. Dust: An Elysian Tail was a favorite of mine several years back; here's hoping this new departure into a different genre exhibits the same polish and fun.

NINTENDO SWITCH

Xenoblade Chronicles 2

AVAILABLE 12/01

BATTLE ATOP MASSIVE TITANS. ANYWHERE.

As the world descends into chaos, you must search for the fabled Elysium, the ultimate paradise. Explore as Rex and Pyra as you take on fantastical beasts on the backs of colossal titans. Only powerful blades can save the world from turmoil.

TEEN T ESRB

Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol and Tobacco
Violence

Game and system sold separately.
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Nintendo

LICENSED MUSIC MOMENTS

by Kyle Hilliard

Albert Fink
Presents
"God Only Knows!"
Columbia's gayest quartet!
Today!
01

"God Only Knows"

BioShock Infinite

A licensed music moment is more than just having a good song on the soundtrack – it's about using that song at the perfect time. The anachronistic barbershop quartet singing a 1966 Beach Boys song in 1912 raises many questions, and perfectly sets up Infinite's mysterious world in an intriguing way.

"Eye Of The Tiger"

Rayman Legends

Covers of beloved songs are hit and miss, but Rayman Legends' mariachi take on Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" is fantastic. The way it is integrated into gameplay makes it a highlight of the entire experience. We'd happily play a whole game of these musical platforming levels.

"Far Away"

Red Dead Redemption

Rockstar expertly creates robust soundtracks for its Grand Theft Auto radio stations, but in 1911, people didn't carry radios on their horses. As a result, hearing Jose Gonzalez's "Far Away" as you enter Mexico stands out in a game full of memorable moments.

"Holding Out For A Hero"

Saints Row: The Third

Saints Row has great radio stations, but the game's final mission, where Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out For A Hero" orchestrates your mad dash to save series mainstay Shaundie, is its best musical moment.

169,900
1,785,900
FEVER SCORE
9,000
05

"Ode To Joy"

Peggle

The nice thing about music written in the early 1800s is you don't have to license it since it's public domain. Peggle's use of Ludwig van Beethoven's "Ode To Joy" still makes this list, however, because hearing the song at the completion of every level never gets old.

From the Man Who Sold the World
SONY
06

"The Man Who Sold The World"

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

Regardless of how you feel about Midge Ure's cover of David Bowie's song, there is no denying its impact as you wake up in a hospital room in the opening moments of The Phantom Pain. Without getting into spoilers, it's thematically consistent with the game's twisted narrative.

"Ain't No Rest For The Wicked"

Borderlands

Before its debut, Borderlands was a mysterious property. After the game's opening featuring this Cage the Elephant song, we knew we had a goofy and exciting shooter on our hands.

"Don't Fear The Reaper"

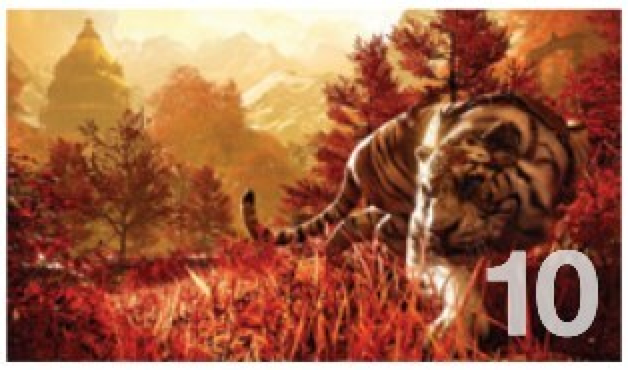
Prey (2006)

Prey opens in a non-descript bar with protagonist Tommy questioning his future. Within moments, however, aliens steal his loved ones into the sky and in all of the confusion, the jukebox is blasting Blue Öyster Cult with reckless abandon.

"Halloween Theme"

What Remains of Edith Finch

Part of the charm of hearing the theme from John Carpenter's classic horror film in Edith Finch is its unexpected inclusion. Indie developers don't typically spend money on licensing music, but when it appears during Barbara's story, it perfectly accompanies her horrific tale.



"Jogi"

Far Cry 4

Panjabi MC's 2003 hit "Jogi" isn't widely known in the States, so its inclusion in Far Cry 4 served as an introduction for many. The song helped to create an exciting, trippy, and intense shoot-out as it slowly overpowered the rest of the game's sound. ◆

ADVENTURE WHENEVER, WHEREVER.

NINTENDO SWITCH

FIRE EMBLEM WARRIORS

The Elder Scrolls V
SKYRIM
Bethesda

Xenoblade Chronicles 2

Games Rated:

TEEN to MATURE 17+ T-M ESRB esrb.org

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FULL STEAM AHEAD

MercurySteam's crazy journey, from Scrapland to Samus – and beyond

The past few months have been eventful ones for MercurySteam. The Madrid, Spain-based studio has released a pair of games that highlight its split-brain philosophy. Metroid: Samus Returns, the reimagined version of the Game Boy game Metroid II, received both critical acclaim and an enthusiastic reception from fans. Meanwhile, a separate team unleashed the self-published shooter Raiders of the Broken Planet – a risky and ambitious move that tackles new genres, distribution models, and online infrastructure.

"It's the first online game with backend support that we've made," says lead programmer and studio co-founder Darío Halle. "A long time ago, when we started the company, I used to say that we will never make a massive multiplayer game, because it's crazy." And yet, 15 years after the studio was founded, they've done just that. Halle seems humorously resigned to it all. "It's the spirit of MercurySteam," he says with a sigh. "We are crazy."

The people at the studio may be crazy, but they're also accommodating. They allowed me to visit their studio during an intense period, when Raiders of the Broken Planet went live. I received a behind-the-scenes look at what goes into a digital game's release (sadly, there's no red "launch" button) and got to know the talented studio that's worked on both the Castlevania and Metroid sides of the so-called Metroidvania formula. It's a rarely seen side of game development that I'm both honored and excited to share.

by Jeff Cork

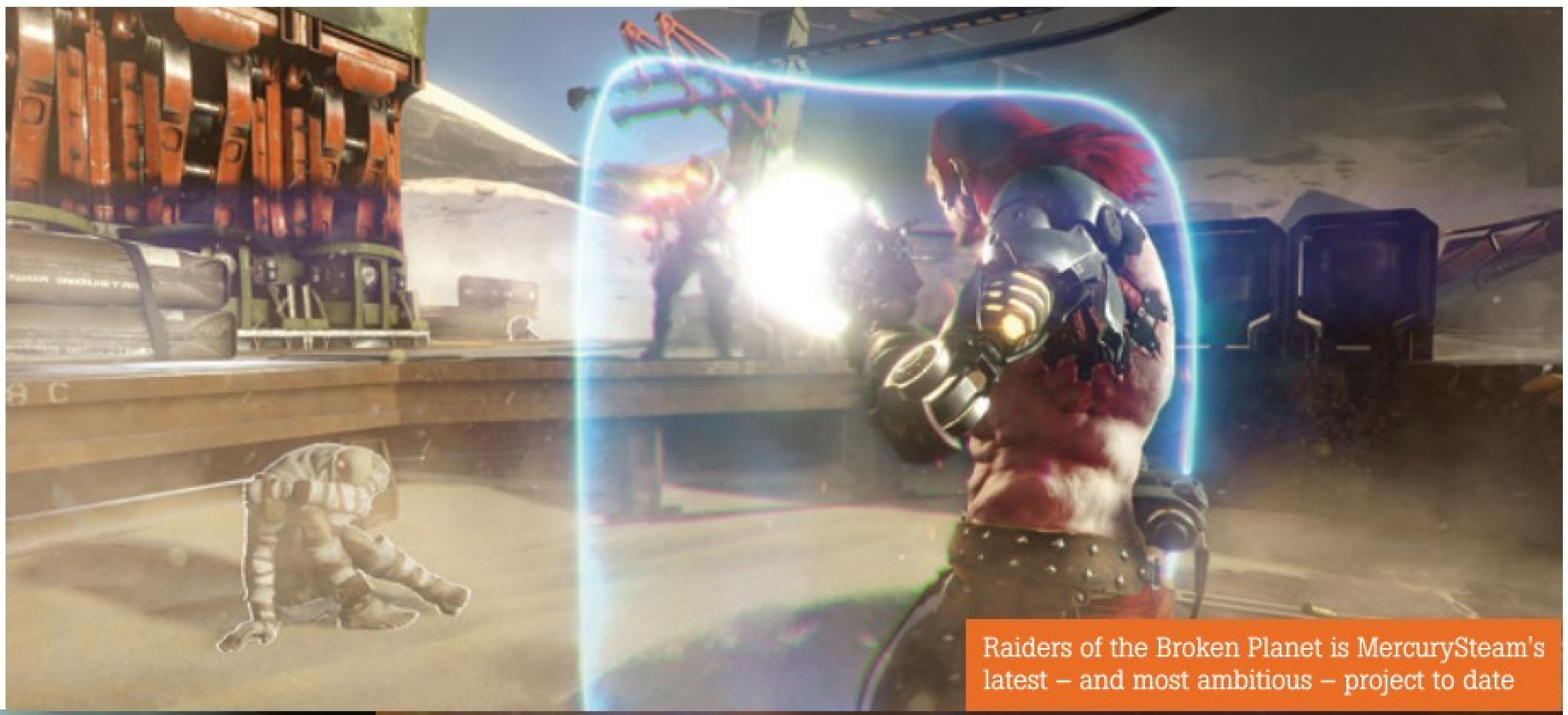
MercurySteam's current team size is a far cry from it's early days, when the entire staff worked out of a small house

CREATORS OF THE BROKEN PLANET

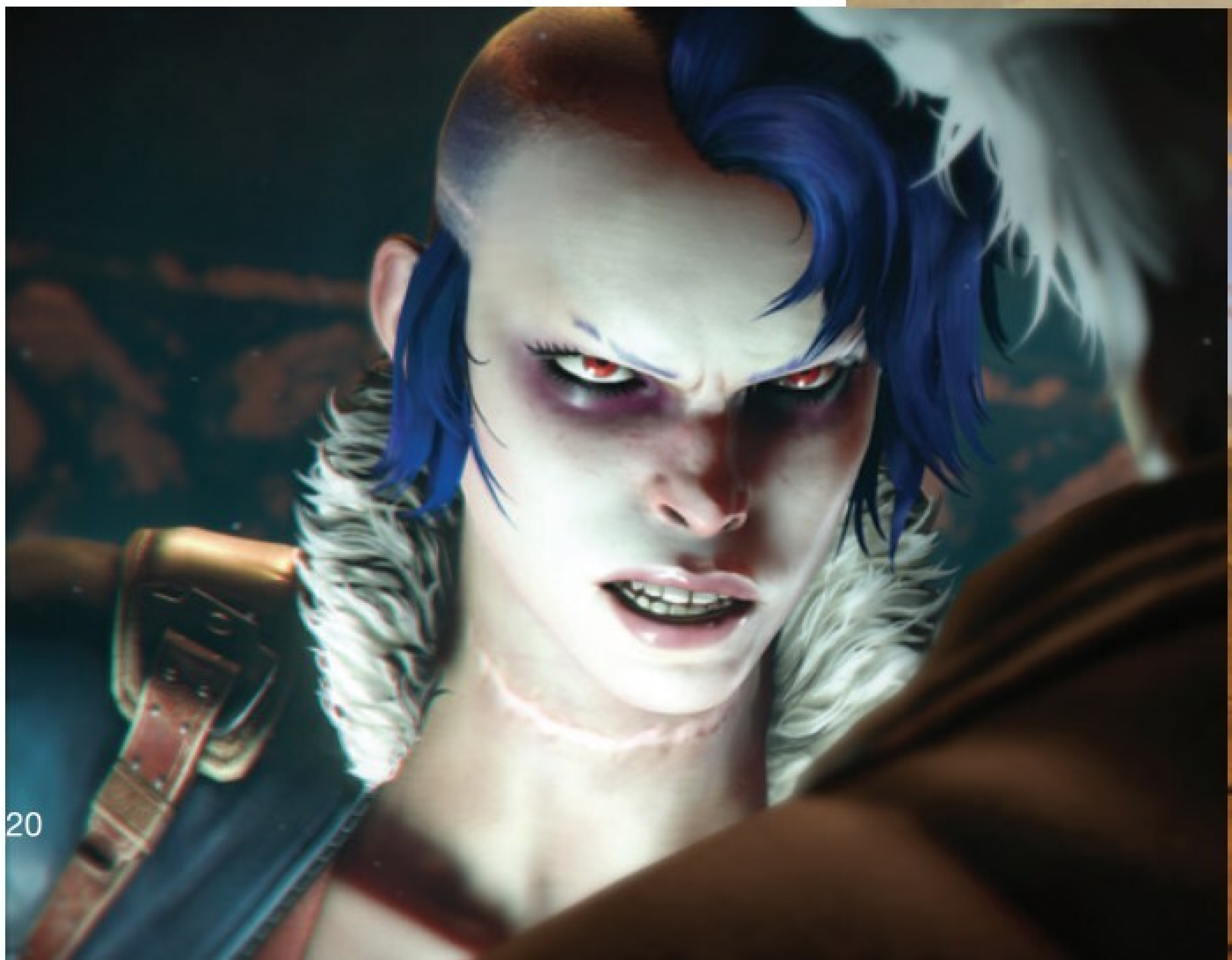
Take a look at MercurySteam's output, and you see a set of titles that don't conform to any obvious themes or genres. Rather than settle on a particular type of game, this scrappy studio enjoys taking on challenges wherever they come – from horror to hack-and-slash, open-world sci-fi to squad-based shooters. "This is because we like to take risks," says Enric Álvarez, MercurySteam's CEO and game director. "The most successful developers, they've been doing the same f---ing game for the last 20 years. Fair enough. I think they're right and we're wrong. But you know what? We'd get bored."

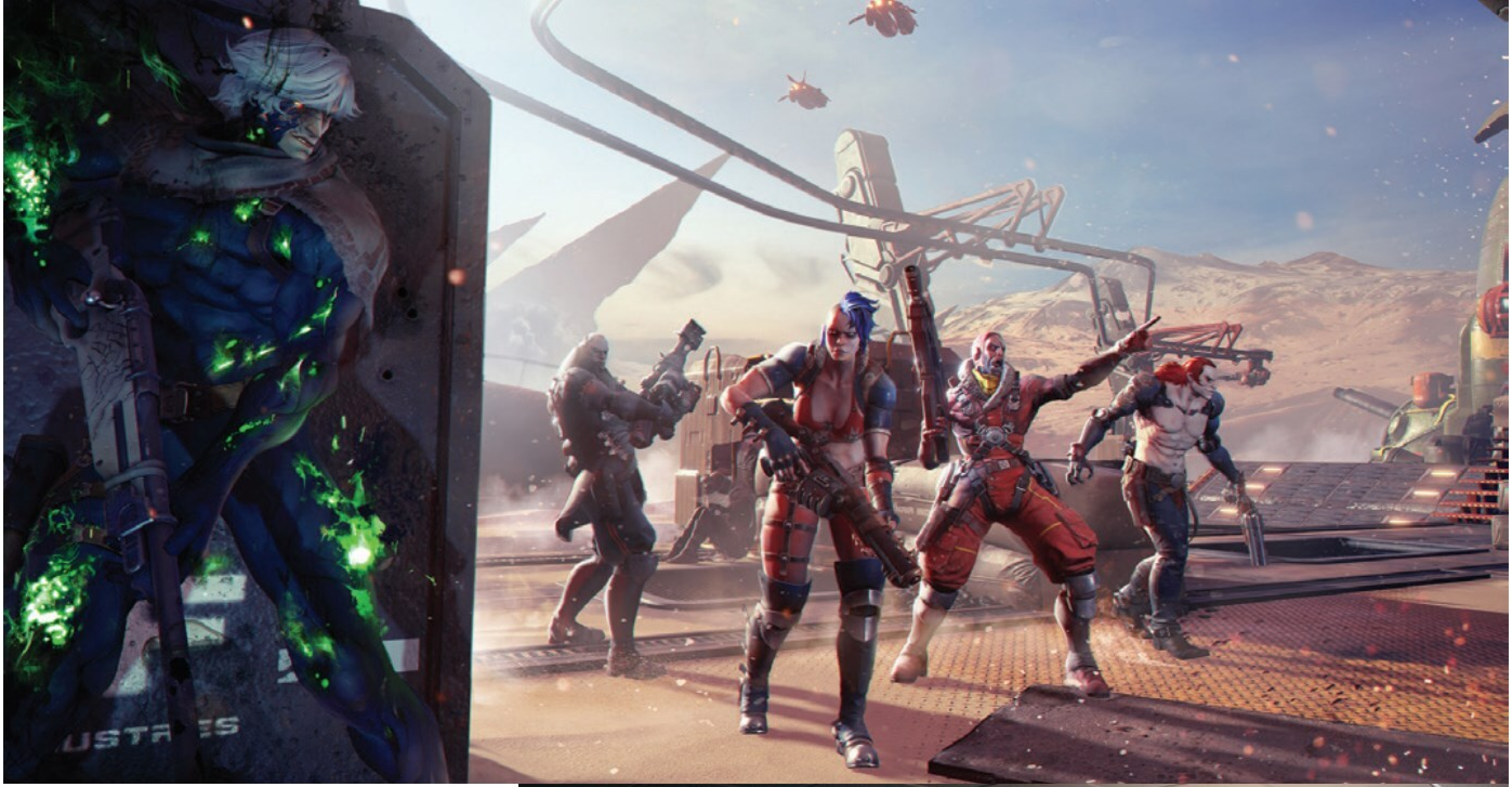
Those risks seem to have paid off. Since it was founded about 15 years ago, the studio has grown from a team that crammed into a small house to a force of about 130 people. When I visit, the bulk of the developers are packed into half of the large office floor, while renovations on the other half are being finished. Álvarez takes me on a tour, and I see where the artists, programmers, and designers spend their days. The only part that's off limits is the Metroid team, which is cordoned off along a wall. The studio is split into two teams, which Álvarez says allows MercurySteam to take on traditional third-party development for other publishers – like Nintendo – as well as its own self-funded endeavors. "Our plan is half the studio is working on traditional publisher/developer games and opportunities that we consider interesting, and the other part is going crazy with our own stuff. This is kind of a perfect way to move forward."

We met for dinner the night before to talk about MercurySteam's ambitious new game, Raiders of the Broken Planet. Its release date is only a few days ahead, and some potholes still exist. Multiple betas have given the team a chance to make sure that the tech behind the online third-person shooter is sound, but they face a problem beyond their control: certification. With only a few dozen hours before the announced launch date, only one of the three platform holders has given the final go-ahead. Sony is set, but final negotiations with



Raiders of the Broken Planet is MercurySteam's latest – and most ambitious – project to date



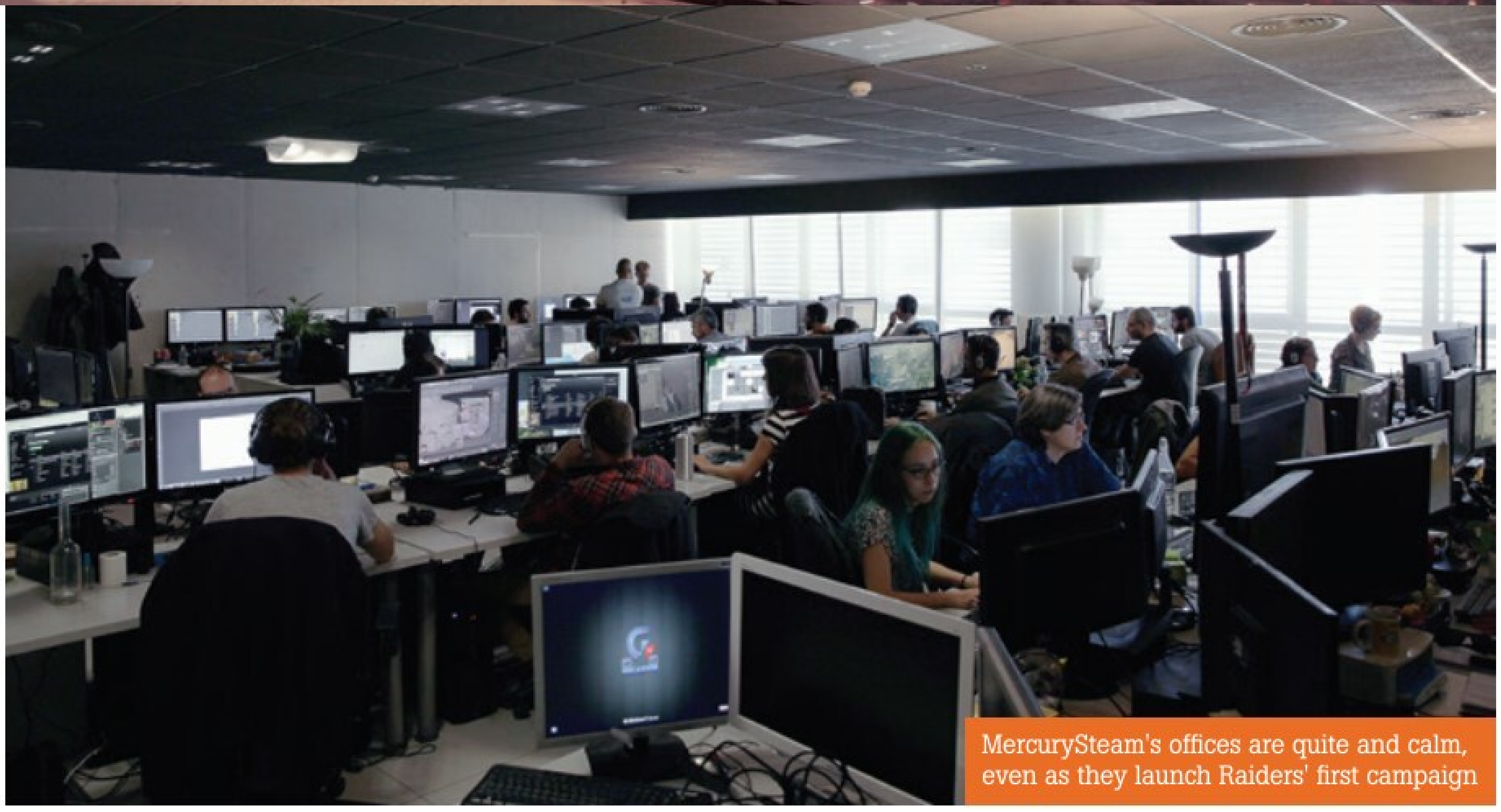


Microsoft and Valve are still pending. Without their approval, the game won't be able to be sold or played on Xbox One and Steam. As you can imagine, that's a problem.

Despite the looming drama, Álvarez is in good spirits. He's funny and excitable, and clearly has a great deal of respect for his team, many of which have been with the company since the beginning. When he talks about his co-workers, he frequently gushes over their talents, calling out their dedication and skills or simply adding unofficial job titles before introductions like, "He's a genius." Even as the future of the studio's next big gamble is seemingly at risk, he's excited to discuss how he got into the industry (designing his own Quake levels), how he learned English (in three months, after realizing he couldn't communicate with publishers about business), and how he likes Madrid (it's a good place, but Barcelona is better).

Things are looking up the next morning. "Today, we have confirmation that Steam is okay," Álvarez says. "But Microsoft is not." The issue centers on online matchmaking, and what happens when a person receives an invitation to a friend's game while they're queuing up for another match. "In this case, it's not obvious that we are failing the submission. I think it's a matter of opinion. Depending on how you see the game, you may think, 'Oh hey, this is wrong,' like they're saying, or they might accept it. I trust that we will come to agreement because we have a good relationship with them. Nonetheless, it's quite stressful being 24 hours before release and still having this kind of problem."

I ask what happens if they can't agree on a solution. Álvarez says then it comes down to negotiation. "We give them options, and then we come to agreement," he says. "At the end of the day, you have to come to agreement." Fortunately, it doesn't take until the end of the day. A few hours later, a wave of applause travels across the studio floor. Microsoft has given Raiders the thumbs up.



MercurySteam's offices are quite and calm, even as they launch Raiders' first campaign

TIME TO LAUNCH

I wasn't sure what to expect during my visit, and Álvarez picks up on it. I've visited a fair number of game-development studios over the years, and in many ways MercurySteam is quite similar. Located in a nondescript building, it houses a small army of people with toy-filled desks and has a quiet, convivial atmosphere. The thing is, I'm anticipating a much greater sense of urgency. Unlike typical cover-story visits, which focus on games that are coming out months or even years later, these people are launching Raiders of the Broken Planet in just a few hours. Or at least, they're releasing the first campaign. Here's where it gets a little complicated.

Raiders of the Broken Planet is an unconventional proposition. Each of the game's four campaigns are playable independently for about $10 a pop. Each one tells its own story, with new characters, gameplay elements, and a narrative arc that can be enjoyed a la carte. While the first one has been greenlit, the team is still diligently working on the rest of the game. "I don't have that sensation that it's the end of something," says lead artist Jorge Benedito. "We continue to work. I hope when the last campaign is done we can be a little more relaxed."

With everything greenlit on Sony, Microsoft, and Valve's end, there's nothing particularly glamorous left to do for the game's launch. The studio is operating its own back end, since it provides greater freedom for matchmaking. A pair of engineers clear out the old beta databases and remove previous login restrictions from the server. Álvarez jokes that the process requires two people, much like the giant robots in *Pacific Rim*. At that point, players will be able to download and play the game from their consoles or PC as soon as the various platform holders activate the games on their end.

Now that the certification drama has subsided and MercurySteam's servers are live, the launch itself is invisible. I ask several people if they know when, exactly, it's going to happen, and it doesn't seem to be much of a concern. There's not a countdown clock on the wall. I learn the next morning that someone in New Zealand downloaded it the second it went live on their end, which was about midnight in Spain – a few hours after the studio gathered at a nearby bar for celebratory drinks.

Building Up MercurySteam

THE EARLY DAYS

MercurySteam was founded in 2002 by the core members of the Severance: Blade of Darkness team. Rebel Act Studios published the PC game a year earlier – its first and only release – before going bankrupt. "It's still considered the granddaddy of Dark Souls, because essentially it's the same gameplay. but it failed," says Enric Álvarez, MercurySteam's CEO and game director. Severance's blend of melee combat and dismemberment may or may not have left an indelible mark on the industry, but the team knew it wanted to keep making games together. Fifteen years later, the majority of that team is still working under the same roof.

Álvarez says MercurySteam began work on its first game against the advice of experts. Before incorporating the studio, he says he asked people with lengthy game-industry careers if his fledgling 18-person team had a shot in games. "All of them, with no exception, told me, 'Don't do it,'" Álvarez recalls. "They told me, 'You don't understand this industry, you're going to fail, you're going to lose every single cent you put into this, it's going to be a disaster.' You know what? They were right."

MercurySteam's first game was a sci-fi, open-world title called American McGee Presents Scrapland. It was, in Álvarez's words, "a f---ing disaster." He says the publisher ripped them off, offering little in support aside from a small amount of marketing, and taking half of the money. "We learned a very valuable lesson on that project," he says. "We saw a pittance and we recouped maybe one fourth of what we spent."

The next year was spent unsuccessfully shopping around a pitch for an original horror game. Days before Álvarez was ready to give up, he got a call from Codemasters. The publisher had seen taped footage of the demo and was impressed. However, Codemasters didn't believe that the sequence, which featured a young girl possessed by demons à la *The Exorcist*, was real. "We had to get a PC, go to England, plug the PC in there and show them that it was real time," he says. "It was at that meeting when they decided, 'Okay guys, don't go anywhere else.' My mindset was already out. We failed. But God saved us." That demo eventually became Clive Barker's Jericho.

"It was a great opportunity, but the end result was mediocre," Álvarez says. "It has its brilliant moments, but we weren't able to make it happen as we'd wanted." He lays part of the blame at his team's lack of experience, but also says that the relationship with Codemasters at a corporate level was difficult. "Essentially, we wanted to go in a more horror way, and they wanted to go in a more action way. If you slap the name of Clive Barker on your name, people will expect to find Clive Barker content. That was our position. But they preferred a more action-oriented, squad-based shooter game. Of course, any horror is automatically removed."

Even though the final product was a neutered version of the team's original vision, some saw the horror within – and were impressed. Dave Cox, a producer at Konami, contacted Álvarez and asked if they would be interested in a Castlevania reboot. After being convinced that no, it wasn't a joke, the team put together a Castlevania pitch for Konami. The publisher was impressed by MercurySteam's dark, gothic take on the franchise, and development moved ahead. Then it hit a road bump. Konami had second thoughts about calling it a Castlevania.

"Dave Cox called and said to me, 'Enric, I have bad news,'" Álvarez says. "I thought everything was canceled. Then surprisingly enough, he said, 'We're still interested, but it has to be without the Castlevania brand on it.' It was a major disappointment, but at the same time they would allow us to make a game I'd always wanted to make." Salvation came in the form of Metal Gear creator Hideo Kojima. Cox presented the work-in-progress, then known simply as Lords of Shadow, to the Konami higher-ups, which included Kojima. Afterward, Álvarez says Kojima said, "I don't understand why this is not Castlevania." With that comment, the game got the Castlevania name back.

The game was a critical and sales hit for Konami. "We put Castlevania on the mainstream, and it never was there before," Álvarez says. Thanks to the positive reaction, the publisher tapped MercurySteam to develop two more games within the Lords of Shadow universe.

The first game, Lords of Shadow: Mirror of Fate was a 2.5D side-scroller more closely aligned with the original game's presentation, though it was steeped in MercurySteam's Lords of Shadow lore and featured more in-depth combat systems. Initially, they planned for it to be a scaled-down version of the first Lords of Shadow game on PlayStation Vita. Konami changed course, and the game's direction was reconfigured to better support its ultimate home, the Nintendo 3DS. "It got good reviews and was appreciated by people, but not as much as the first Lords of Shadow," Álvarez says. It did garner at least one important fan, however, but we'll get to that in a little bit.

THE LORDS OF SHADOW 2 FALLOUT, AND BOUNCING BACK

The other MercurySteam Castlevania title was what Álvarez now calls "the infamous Lords of Shadow 2." To say that the sequel was polarizing is an understatement. The team set out to make good on the surprise ending of their first game, which featured – spoiler alert – the reveal that Gabriel Belmont became Dracula, and was living in the modern age.

"I think the pride we had with Lords of Shadow 2 is that it was different from the first Lords of Shadow," says lead programmer and studio co-founder Darío Halle. Indeed, MercurySteam pushed beyond the framework of the first Lords of Shadow games in significant ways. The sequel shed the linear, level-based format in favor of an open world that could be freely traversed. Camera control was given to players, and the team worked to improve the underlying combat systems. Álvarez is particularly proud of the game's story, which he says shows Dracula's internal struggle in a way that had never been seen before. For all its improvements, the game was ravaged by the press, and years later it's clear that some of those wounds are still fresh.

"It was depressing," Álvarez says. "Because it cost us a lot of work, and it was like, we don't understand." In spite of the game's flaws – which he readily ticks down – Álvarez says the glee with which reviewers took the game to task seemed to go beyond criticism. "Many reviews were like settling accounts with us. It was like, 'This is my chance to talk s--- about you, because I will never forgive you for what you did to the first Lords of Shadow. Even today, I still get tweets saying, 'You destroyed Castlevania, and now you're going to destroy Metroid.'"

Mirror of Fate may not have gotten as much attention as the other Lords of Shadow games – positive, or negative – but it did impress the right people. Nintendo producer Yoshio Sakamoto played the game and enjoyed it, and thought MercurySteam might be the right team for a special project. "Thanks to Mirror of Fate, we have that Metroid game," Álvarez says. "It's crazy. You never know."

Álvarez says Nintendo reached out to him and set up a meeting at San Francisco's annual Game Developer's Conference. "I went to the meeting without knowing anything," Álvarez says. "Just that we were meeting with Nintendo." After giving a general pitch on MercurySteam, he was asked if his team would be interested in developing what would become Metroid: Samus Returns, a 3DS reimagining of the Game Boy game Metroid II: Return of Samus. "'Are you kidding?" Álvarez recalls answering. "Of course, we are."

When he returned to Spain with the news, his team had the same reaction that they did years earlier after hearing that they were going to make a new Castlevania: disbelief. "Nintendo wants to make a game with you. Really?" Halle recalls. "We didn't believe it. 'You are joking.'"

MercurySteam had a deep respect for the original game, but was aware that game design had changed since the game initially launched in 1991. "Unlike the original games, Samus Returns is a game of our time," Álvarez says. "Things change over time … design is a language. You need to speak the same language as the people you are making games for. If you speak a different language, they won't understand. So Samus Returns speaks today's language, but in a classic 2D side-scroller game. I think it's the best version of that game … Of course, we're going to have haters, because our games have the strange capacity to be divisive, but maybe Samus Returns is the first game we ever did that is widely recognized as a good game."

WHAT'S AHEAD

The next morning, it's back to business. I attend a quick stand-up meeting with members of the technical staff, where they discuss how the game is working since launch. Representatives from various departments give quick updates, which include word of a few newly detected bugs and an issue with premium currency on PS4. Other than that, things seem to be working out nicely.

Things may seem smooth now, but the road ahead is uncertain. Other character-based shooters, like Evolve and Battleborn, have struggled in the marketplace, even with the backing of large publishers. That's something that isn't far from Álvarez's mind. "Of course, we think about it," he says. "We're nervous. I think we'll quickly find out what's going to happen. For us, it never was a drag race. We already know Raiders is going to start slow. The campaign-based nature of the game will hopefully help this game as a growing fan base over time."

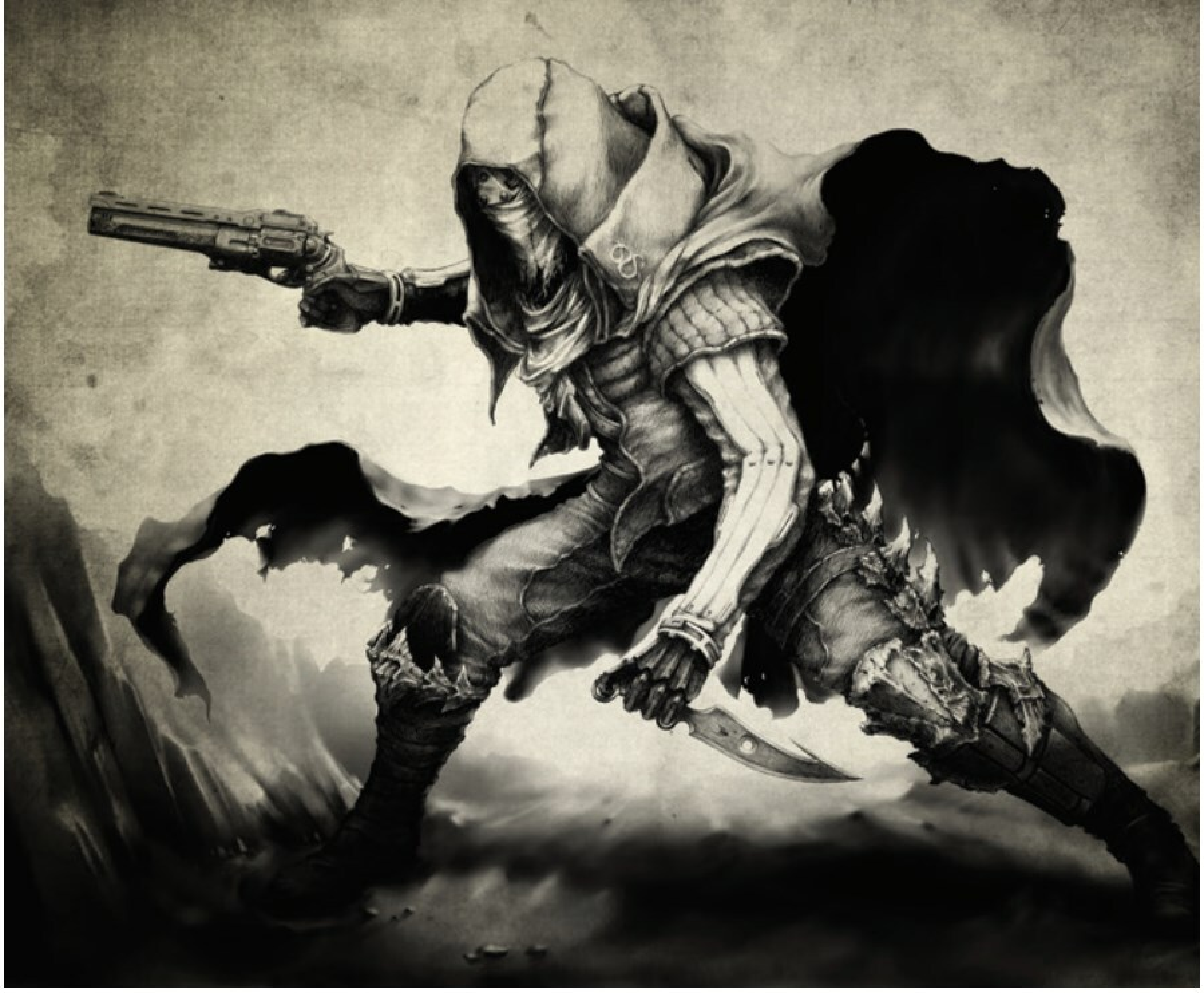
Now that the game has launched, the attention shifts toward engaging players, with the two-person community team spending its time responding to tweets and interacting with fledgling fans. Álvarez finishes work cutting a trailer for the game. Meanwhile, the rest of MercurySteam forges ahead on Raiders of the Broken Planet and whatever else comes next.

A few weeks after the first campaign's launch, I check back in with the team to see how things are faring. So far, there haven't been many major surprises. "The game is progressing as we expected it would," says senior PR manager José Herráez. "We have had hundreds of thousands of players trying the free prologue, and an expected percentage of them purchased the campaign."

"Some members of the second team have taken some well-deserved holidays," Herráez adds. "Some of them are giving a hand on Raiders, while other are starting to explore new possibilities..."

What's next for MercurySteam? Whether it's more Raiders of the Broken Planet, something completely new, or some combination of the two, one thing is nearly certain: It's going to be crazy. ◆

Metroid: Samus Returns



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Brian Moncus

Location:
Sundersville, GA

Twitter:
@bkmoncus

DeviantArt:
brianmoncus.
deviantart.com

Drawing Light And Darkness

Destiny community artist reimagines Bungie's designs

Hundreds of talented artists create unique interpretations of characters and settings from their favorite games, adding a new dimension to the official developer renditions. Brian Moncus is a longtime Destiny fan, and has developed a following for his striking art of the characters from Bungie's saga. We spoke with Moncus about his inspirations, what he likes about the game, and were lucky enough to get a look at two of his latest projects, seen here for the first time.

interview by Matt Miller

How did you first get into playing Destiny?
Hard to believe it's been three years now. I was a big Halo fan back when I was younger, when the Xbox first had its real big run of Halo. Bungie was just a company I followed after that. When Destiny came out in 2014, I picked it and the Xbox One up at the same time and started playing. I guess the rest is history; I just kind of stayed with it. It was definitely a change for me because I hadn't played a video game that avidly since I was in college.

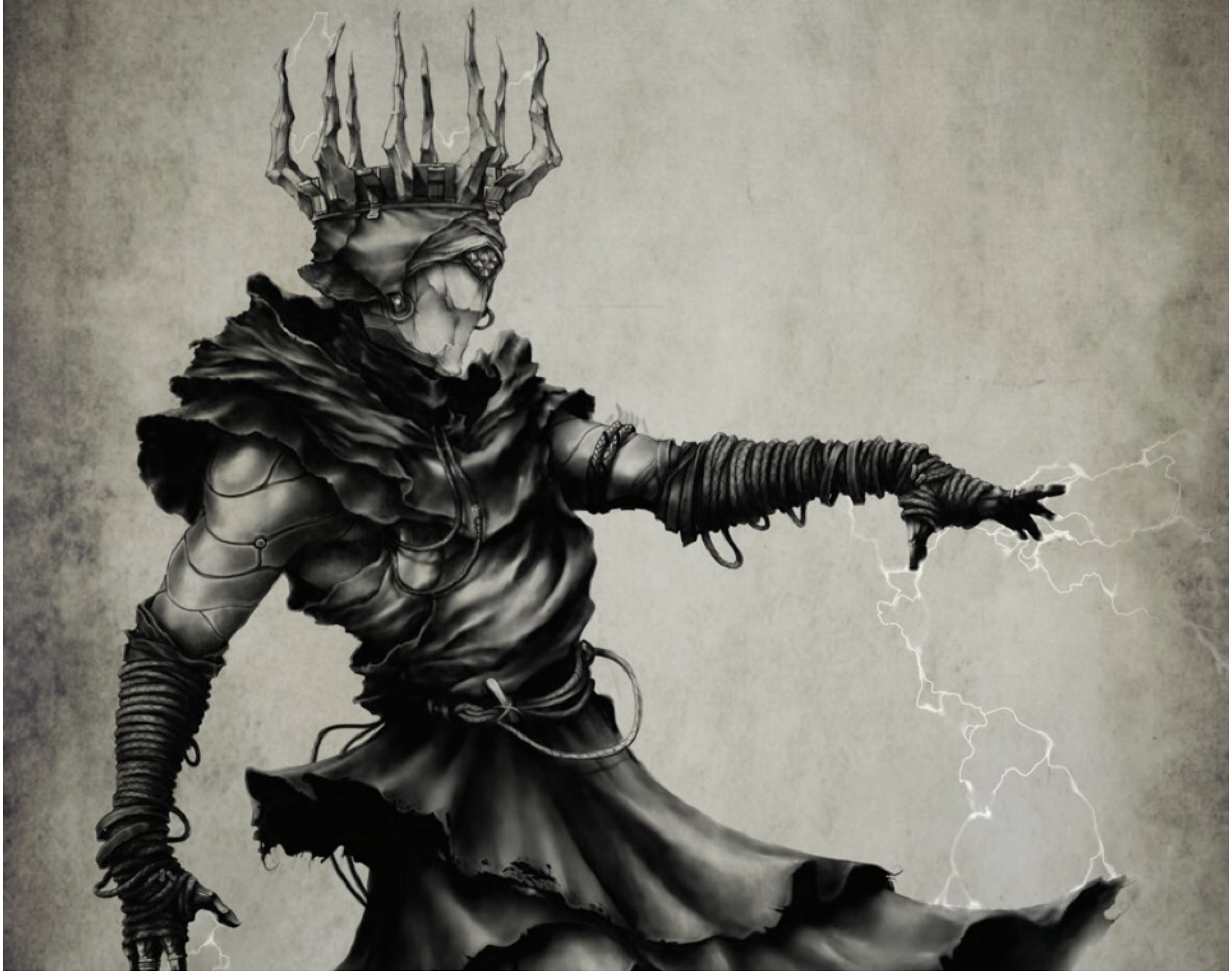
Were you playing on a regular basis? Were you playing every week?
I was. I was also in the midst of a home restoration, so I was trying to divide up my time between family, that, and my art. I had my time that I could jump in and play, but it often wasn't as much as I would have liked.

What has kept you playing all these years?
First off, I'm a really big fan of first-person shooters. But I think what drew me into Destiny more so than some of the other first-person shooters I've played since those days is the fact that it had almost an element of an MMO/RPG feel to it. It just kind of stuck with me, and I couldn't help but to keep playing it.

What about the game's visual landscape inspired you artistically?
With any game I get into the story and the lore behind some of the characters and the world that they're in. When you play these things so deeply and you get involved with the story, you kind of get your own feel for the world. You have these ideas of how you want to tweak things and put your own spin on something. Playing Destiny, and playing it with friends especially, it really just makes you want to go out and do something extra other than play the game. The visual aspect of the game makes me want to tell my own story, so to speak, or put my own versions out there, that picture in my head of how these characters would be.

Have you been playing much of Destiny 2?
I definitely have. Funny story, really. My wife has barely played a video game since maybe Crash Bandicoot when she was younger. We jokingly made her a character and she is now full force into it. We play together. I went out and bought another PlayStation so that we could play together, and we have been playing weekly doing things, trying to get her more in tune with it. I have been playing way more than I would have been playing if she hadn't come along.

In your work, you're exploring a visual style that was established by Bungie artists, and then adapting it. How would you describe the style of the pieces we're looking at here?
I try to exaggerate a lot in areas that I

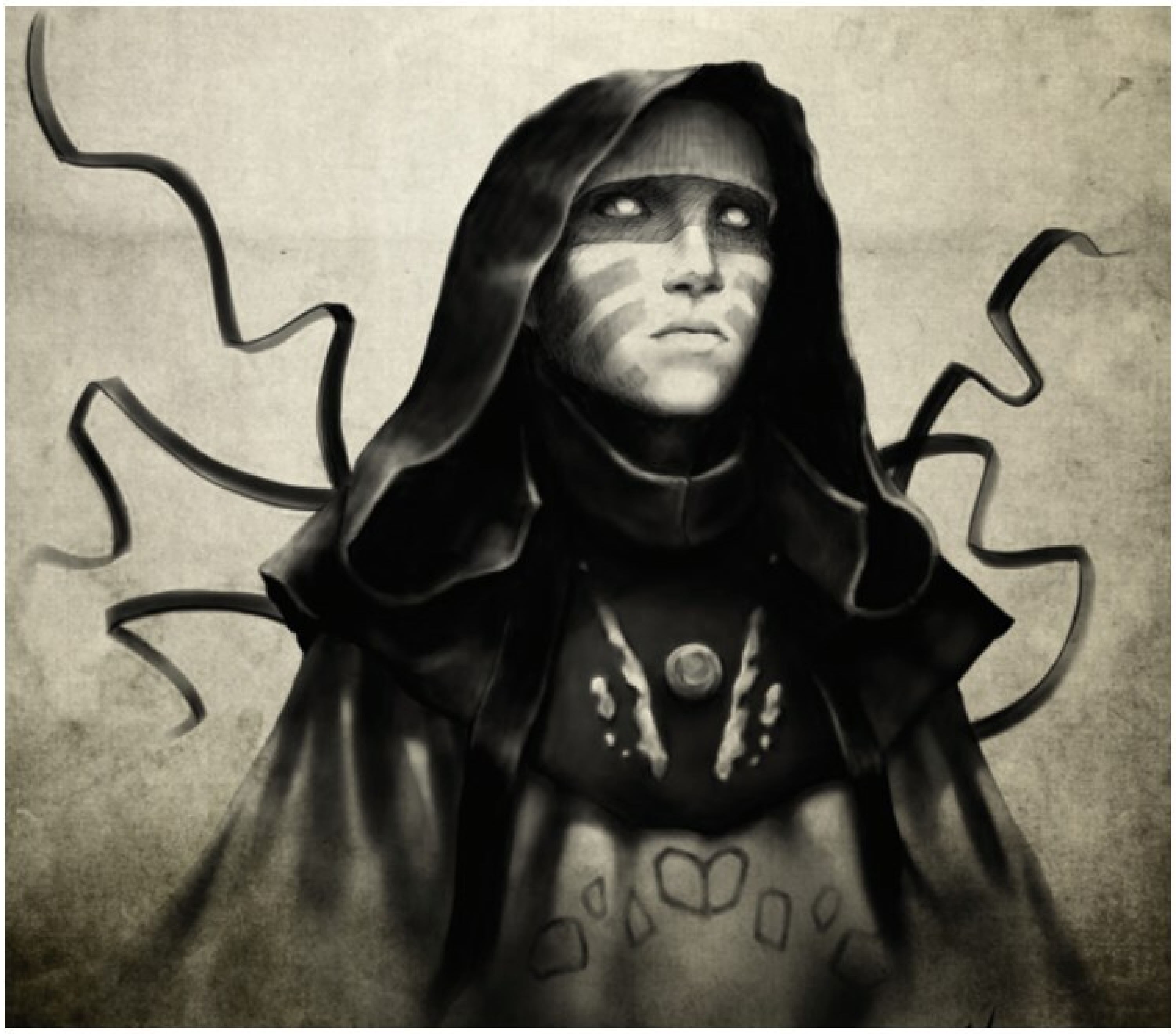


think it's not going to take away from the design of what's there, but also maybe promote some areas so that it brings out the feel of whatever my subject is. I take the elements that they've designed and kind of push them a little bit. What would these items actually look like? Would they be battle-worn?

What drew you to these two pieces we're seeing here for the first time?

We'll start with the Emissary (below). The Emissary of the Nine was one of the first things in Destiny 2 that I thought was new, that was different, that we hadn't seen anything of before. We had always heard about Xur and how he was an agent of the Nine, but nobody really knew anything about him. Seeing the Emissary and the design that they took with that inspired me to do something of my own and kind of recreate it but at the same time add a little flair to it.

The second one is the Stormcaller class for the Warlock (above). I haven't done one of that class yet, and when I first started playing Destiny 2, one of the first exotics I saw someone running around with was the Crown of Tempests, which is one of the new exotics for the Stormcaller class. It's such a different design from what I was used to seeing in Destiny 1. It almost had a *Lord of the Rings* feel to the helm, and I had to take and just kind of twist it and exaggerate a few things and just add my own interpretation.



How did you train as an artist? What are some of your inspirations?

I attended Savannah College of Art and Design with a major in sequential art and a minor in animation when I graduated high school in 2002. As far as art, that's where my foundation for the black and white everything that I do came from. That's where I learned more of a classical approach to all of that. I kind of had that traditional approach that feeds into my digital work, which I learned on my own, so there's no real schooling there.

I'm inspired by a hodgepodge of artists. Everything from classical paintings and portraiture or anything from Caravaggio all the way to comic book artists such as Todd McFarlane, Joe Madureira, and Alex Ross. I'm still learning new stuff every day, and getting new artists that I love every day. ◆

photo: Andrew Faulk

The Man Behind The Mask

Best known for directing the Nier and Drakengard series, Yoko Taro reached a new level of success after teaming up with Platinum Games for Nier: Automata, which sold over two million copies. We chatted with Taro about his newfound success and what's next. Just like his esoteric games, our talk was anything but ordinary.

What attracted you to becoming a video game creator?

I used to play at arcades every day from a young age. At that time, video games were considered to be something that delinquents played. So I, being an otaku, felt terrified while I played games. I could go on forever if I started to list the games that I liked, but the title that made me want to make games myself was Gradius. I still remember how shocking it was to see a game where the stages "change" at a time when repetitive stages were popular. Even as a child, I knew that computer graphics would continue to evolve, so the reason I decided to get into the gaming industry was because *interview by Kimberley Wallace*

I was certain that games would surpass films and overshadow all other video mediums.

After Cavia disbanded, it seemed like the Nier series was dead. How does it feel to be able to go back to a series after thinking it wasn't going to live on?
After we released Drakengard 3, I think everyone was well sick of all the games I made by then, and I really didn't really want to work anymore. I was thinking I'd probably just go and hide in the mountains and live out the rest of my life as a hermit or something. It just so happens at that time Mr. Yosuke Saito, [who] was obviously a bit tired after his work on Dragon Quest and was not thinking straight, decided to give me another chance with something like Nier. That's how you saw a new Nier; I'm still not sure how that happened.

Considering the time off between it and the original, were you surprised by the success of Automata?
Certainly from my perspective and from the fan's perspective, I think everyone thought Nier was a very dead IP at that point, so I was very surprised when they started talking about doing another one. I [thought] it would be very interesting when I heard that Platinum would be developing another one. I didn't think it'd be a hit, though; I [thought] probably it'd be a very niche game. But no, there was certainly potential there. Looking back on it, I think the kind of games that Platinum makes are very much for those action-game maniacs, and it's a very closed-off area, but it seemed like an excellent fit with the kind of really geeky worlds that Square-Enix makes. I think overall, they became a great combination together.

The subject of humanity and death is something you often like to explore in your works. What interests you about these themes?
Death is kind of inherent in games. Usually that's by killing your enemies, so in playing and creating games, it's something you have to think about because it is integral to a lot of titles. I make my games not really as far as going into big themes of life or how people think of life or anything like that, but I want to make games [that will make people think about] kind of more deep things like, "Why do I play games?" or "What's my relationship to games?" – things like that.

You're very vocal about your love of drinking. Is that part of your creative process?
I mean certainly, I've always liked drinking a lot, but I remember when I was writing the previous games' scenarios and the stories for them, I noticed a [recurring theme] that all the stuff I had written when I was really out of it was actually the stuff that everyone really liked. And I thought, "Why the hell should that be?" It worked out. If I drink, I become a bit tipsy and a bit of a fool, and I lose my inhibitions. That kind of uninhibited story writing only comes out when I'm drinking, so I definitely try to drink a lot more whenever I'm writing now. It's very interesting; when I'm writing when I'm sober, it's like, "Ah yes, that's an interesting story, I'll write that, I'll put that there." But that's very different then when I've started drinking. I just start getting involved and having emotional an connection to the characters. I'll start crying and [I'm] like, "Wow, this is a really sad story!" So yeah, that's why I think it's better. Then I'll pass out, and wake up with tears down my face like, "Oh, I was writing a story." In the original Nier, there was the story of the wolf and the people with the masks. I remember crying along with the story as I was writing it while I was completely wasted.

Your games always include multiple endings. What do you do to ensure that players are compelled to see them all the way through?
I don't think people really have to see all of them, you know? I don't try that hard to make sure they do. I think there's a lot of people who play games nowadays and they don't go all the way through to completion, and you have to accept that as one way that people like to play games. So you'll maybe see one ending and then stop – or some people may not even see one – [and] stop halfway between that. They're all legitimate ways of playing, and I'm quite happy people can play that way. The way that my endings are generally structured in my games [is that they go] from Ending A to Ending E. [The structure] we generally have is each one reveals a new layer of something, or there's something that if you only saw it to the end of here, you'll maybe get one answer; if you move on, you'll see a deeper answer and something different, and [then] move on. For those people who want to go all the way through to the final ending, I then want them to go even further from that and come up with their own ideas. There will be things that they come out with and things that they see there, and I really want them to have that kind of sense of imagination in their minds as well.

In Automata, you gave players the choice to sacrifice something valuable to create a really meaningful ending. Do you have any data on how many people did this? What motivated you to put that choice in the game?
Most intelligent developers would be taking statistics on that and find out the metrics; but as you may know, I'm quite an idiot, so I don't do that kind of thing. I think rather than knowing which decision players finally took in the end, the important thing is simply having the choice and making that decision. Obviously, it's your life, it's up to you to make that kind of decision, and that's where the meaning in that decision comes. What I was thinking about when I made the decision to design it that way is nowadays you see a lot of people who have gameplay videos up on YouTube, and you can basically see any part of the gameplay for free. So I thought I needed to add something of value to the people who paid 6,000-7,000 yen for this game, and give them a kind of experience that you can't get just by watching on YouTube.

How do you feel about the current state of the Japanese video game industry?
I think what's happening at the moment in the Western video game industry is that there's very much this polarization into the big triple-A games and also the indies, and there's very little in the middle to fill that space. What's happening is Japan is you've got a lot of games that maybe aim for triple-A but don't quite make it there, and they actually come into that gap. So when these then go to Europe and America, they're actually filling in that gap and they fit in really well in that niche market, and I think that's why we're seeing a lot of success with Japanese games at the moment.

Nier has become quite successful, but do you feel like you'd like to explore new ideas outside of that, such as creating a new IP?
I like to create games in general, so a sequel or a new IP are both types of games that I would like to try creating. Whatever I end up creating though, it is important for me to have a high level of freedom in having control over the project when we begin developing. This way, I am able to challenge myself to try different things. And this doesn't really have much to do with the question, but I do want to try creating a pinball or a vertical scrolling shooter game. Well, this is simply because I like those types of games. ◆

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1970
Born in the city of Nagoya in Aichi Prefecture

1977
I graduated from the Nagoya Women's University Kindergarten. I feel as though I had a girl I liked, but I can no longer remember her name or face

1994
Graduated from Kobe Design University. I vaguely remember studying about video and other things

1994
I joined Namco Ltd. (currently Bandai Namco Entertainment Inc.). I worked on many games, including arcade games such as Alpine Racer 2 and Time Crisis II

1999
I joined Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. (currently Sony Interactive Entertainment Inc.). I helped with games for PlayStation, from Covert Ops: Nuclear Dawn to Phase Paradox

2001
I joined Cavia Inc. (currently Marvelous Inc.). I feel like my relationship with Square Enix started here, but it may just be my imagination

2012
I became unemployed

2015
I became the President and CEO of my own company Bukkoro in order to destroy the world

2017
I was told to prepare my career history for my interview with *Game Informer*, and I wrote this thinking "It will suck if they ask me to rewrite it"

CURRENTLY
Until a moment ago, I was standing behind you with a bloody knife clutched in my hands. Now I am hiding in your closet…

GAME INFORMER'S

HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE

2017

It always feels good to give and to receive, but nothing feels worse than giving or receiving the wrong gift. To help you out this year, we compiled a roundup of the best geek-related toys and tech this holiday season. Get out your pens; you're going to want to circle some stuff.

by Ben Reeves and Matt Miller

1

VLAADA CHVÁTIL
CODENAMES
DUET
TOP SECRET CO-OP GAME
CGE

Spotlight

Codenames: Duet Cooperative Word Game

The stellar party game of deduction and inference has an updated edition, and the new cooperative rules allow for as few as two players. Track down your agents in the field as a spymaster whose only clues are the nebulous connections we form between individual words.

$19.95; czechgames.com

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Azure Drake

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RIVAL
MXVII

4

5

6
CLASSIC EDITION
SUPER NINTENDO

7

① **Dhalsim's Hot Yoga Tee** $19.95; capcomstore.com ② **Hearthstone 3D Printed Phone Case** $34.99; hearthstone.fabzat.com ③ **Nerf Rival Nemesis MXVII-10K Blaster** $99.99; hasbrotoyshop.com ④ **The Legend of Zelda Seatbelt Backpack** $59.90; boxlunch.com ⑤ **The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild Champion Amiibos** $15.99 (Each); nintendo.com/amiibo ⑥ **Super NES Classic Edition** $79.99; nintendo.com/super-nes-classic ⑦ **Lapel Enamel Pins from logo designer for Night in the Woods** $10.00; etsy.com/shop/pamwishbow

[Full Disclosure: GameStop is the parent company of both Game Informer and ThinkGeek]

Spotlight

Scuf Impact Controller

The pros use Scuf controllers to gain an edge on the competitive circuit, so these high-end PS4 and PC controllers can withstand any punishment you might put them through. Scuf users can design their own controllers from scratch, customizing everything from the color of the outer shell to the lengths of each analog stick to the throw of the shoulder triggers. Up to four reprogrammable back paddles allow you to simulate the individual face buttons, so your thumb can finally get a break.

Starting at $169; scufgaming.com

GALACTIC KING
SUPER POWER
TEAM UP
HANG OUT
FIGHT VILLAINS
GUARD MODE
ALARM

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① **Interactive App-Enabled Spider-Man by Sphero** $149; store.sphero.com ② **Logitech G502 Proteus Spectrum Tunable Gaming Mouse** $79.99; gaming.logitech.com ③ **Octopus Sculpted Ceramic Serving Bowl** $34.99; thinkgeek.com ④ **Bloodborne Omen Tapestry** $45.00; gear.playstation.com ⑤ **Jinx Overwatch Ultimate Hoodies** $59.99; jinx.com ⑥ **Love and Madness Star Wars: A New Hope Leather Wrap Bracelet** $74.90; heruniverse.com ⑦ **Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice Play Arts Kai Statues** $149; store.na.square-enix.com ⑧ **Vive Deluxe Audio Strap** $99.99; vive.com ⑨ **Wonder Woman: Hero's Edition Nendoroid** $44.99; goodsmileshop.com/en

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against the
evil Galactic Empire
During the battle,
the DEATH STAR,
an armored
space
far, far, away....
It is a period
of civil w
Empire's sinister
agents
save her people
and
restore freedom

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Spotlight

Massive Darkness Board Game

Explore vast modular dungeons in this fast-paced board game from CMON. Level up, gather loot, confront deadly creatures, and complete your quest with the aid of a brilliant character upgrade system and incredibly detailed character and monster minis.

$119; cmon.com

MASSIVE DARKNESS

BOOKS

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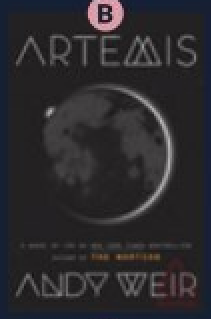

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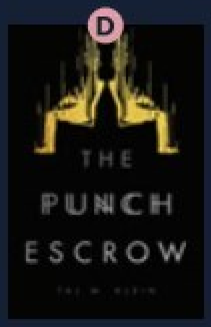

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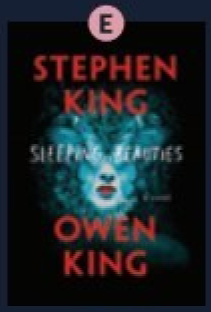

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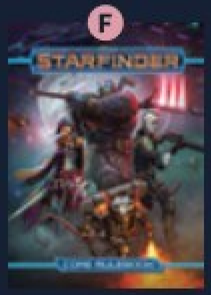

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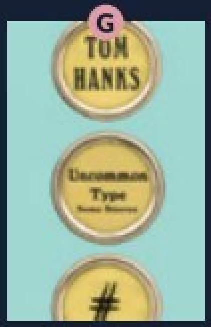

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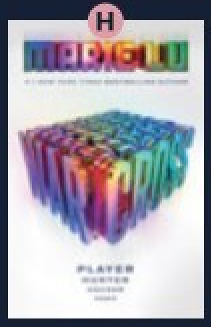

Ⓐ ***Archangel***
by William Gibson
$24.99
idwpublishing.com

Ⓑ ***Artemis* by Andy Weir**
$27.00
andyweirauthor.com

Ⓒ ***Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made***
by Jason Schreier
$15.99
harpercollins.com

Ⓓ ***The Punch Escrow***
by Tal M. Klein
$14.99
tor.com

Ⓔ ***Sleeping Beauties***
by Stephen & Owen King
$35.10
stephenking.com

Ⓕ ***Starfinder Core Rulebook***
$59.99
paizo.com

Ⓖ ***Uncommon Type: Some Stories***
by Tom Hanks
$26.98
penguinrandomhouse.com

Ⓗ ***Warcross* by Marie Lu**
$18.99
onetrueportal.com

MUSIC

A
LCD SOUNDSYSTEM AMERICAN DREAM
B
C
IMAGINE DRAGONS
D
E
F
reputation
G
H
RISE AGAINST
WOLVES

Ⓐ American Dream – LCD Soundsystem
$10.99
americandreamdfa.store

Ⓑ Ctrl – SZA
$9.99
szactrl.com/music

Ⓒ Evolve – Imagine Dragons
$11.88
imaginedragonsmusic.com

Ⓓ Masseducation – St. Vincent
$15.00
ilovestvincent.com

Ⓔ Persona 5 Vinyl Soundtrack 4xLP
$100
iam8bit.com

Ⓕ Reputation – Taylor Swift
$15.00
taylorswift.com

Ⓖ Villains – Queens of the Stone Age
$10.99
matadorrecords.com

Ⓗ Wolves – Rise Against
$9.99
riseagainst.com

Spotlight

Asus ROG Zephyrus GX501 Gaming Laptop

The tech wizards at Asus crammed a desktop PC's horsepower into one ultra-slim laptop that weighs under five pounds. You won't have a problem playing hits like Destiny 2, PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds, or Star Wars Battlefront II thanks to the Zephyrus's GeForce GTX 1080 graphics card, a 7th Generation Intel Core processor, and an optional 120Hz wide-view display.

Starting at $2,299; asus.com

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STAR WARS
G.SKILL

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① **Levitating Death Star Bluetooth Speaker** $179; getplox.com ② **Star Wars The Black Series – Guardians of Evil 4-Pack** $89.99; gamestop.com ③ **G.Skill Ripjaws KM780R Mechanical Gaming Keyboard** $159; gskill.com ④ **7,541-Piece Lego Star Wars Ultimate Collector Series *Millennium Falcon*** $799; shop.lego.com ⑤ **Luke Skywalker's Landspeeder** $499; landspeeder.radioflyer.com ⑥ **Noise Rockstar Logo Tee** $24.99; rockstarwarehouse.com ⑦ **LittleBits Droid Inventor Kit** $99.95; shop.littlebits.cc ⑧ **Stubbins Plush Toys** $12.99; thestubbins.com

Spotlight

Lego Boost Creative Toolbox

Legos are an inventive way to teach kids of all ages about coding. Paired with an Android or iOS app, this collection of building blocks, sensors, and motors allows users to assemble their own robots and program those machines to dance across the room or plot global domination.

$159; lego.com/en-us/boost

Kick 'em Where It Hurts!
GARRETT GRAHAM GABE
GARY GLEN GIL
~~SOMETHING WITH A "G"~~
GHAUL
SPICY RAMEN
辛ロラーメン

Spotlight

Destiny 2 Merch

Express your inner Guardian with new goodies from the Bungie Store, such as Ikora Rey's necklace, a Spicy Ramen t-shirt, and Funko Pops of the Vanguard fireteam. Or you could go high-tech with Razer's new Destiny 2-themed mouse and keyboard. The Traveler would be proud.

Varies; bungiestore.com

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steelseries
steelseries

4

① **Spark Digital Podcasting Microphone for iPad, iPhone, and Laptops** $199; bluemic.com
② **Vivere Double Hammock** $159; vivereltd.com
③ **Xbox One X** $499; xbox.com ④ **Steelseries Arctis 7 Gaming Headset** $149; steelseries.com
⑤ **Rick and Morty Construction Sets** Starting at $12.99; mcfarlane.com ⑥ **Ryu The New Challenger PVC Figure** $100; store.capcom.com
⑦ **Apple TV 4K** Starting at $179; apple.com

5

RYU
K
THE NEW CHALLENGER
RYU

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VIDEO

A
Atomic Blonde
B
DC UNIVERSE
C
D
GAME of THRONES
E
SPIDER-MAN
F
your name

Ⓐ Atomic Blonde
$34.98
focusfeatures.com

Ⓑ DC Universe 10th Anniversary Collection
$299
wbshop.com

Ⓒ Dragon Ball Z: Seasons 1-9 Collection
$174
funimation.com

Ⓓ Game of Thrones: The Complete Seventh Season
$59.99
store.hbo.com

Ⓔ Spider-Man: Homecoming
$38.99
spidermanhomecoming.com

Ⓕ Your Name
$34.98
funimationfilms.com

Spotlight

Sony X940E 4K Ultra HD TV

Sony's newest 4K display is as much of a work of art as the images it displays. Xbox One X and PS4 Pro owners will get the most out of their consoles thanks to the X940E's use of High Dynamic Range (HDR) lighting. The system's Motionflow XR 960 technology and 120Hz response time keeps your games looking smooth on this 55-inch screen no matter what console you own. Sony's Slim Backlight Drive+ technology directs light to where it's needed most, helping create a richer color spectrum and an incredible contrast for movies and games.

$1,699; sony.com

SPECIAL EDITION GAMES

Ⓐ **Assassin's Creed Origins Dawn of The Creed Legendary Edition**
$799; store.ubi.com

Ⓑ **Destiny 2 Collector's Edition**
$249; destinythegame.com

Ⓒ **Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle Collector's Edition**
$99.99; gamestop.com

Ⓓ **Total War: Warhammer II Serpent God Edition**
$149; getwarhammer2.totalwar.com

Ⓔ **Wolfenstein 2: The New Colossus Collector's Edition**
$100; store.bethsoft.com

Spotlight

AOC Agon AG352UCG Curved Gaming Display

Your eyes aren't flat, so maybe your display shouldn't be either. AOC's 35-inch curved display has a 3440x1440 resolution, a 4ms response time, and 100Hz refresh rate. Nvidia's built-in G-Sync technology also helps reduce screen tearing while minimizing display stutter and input lag. Translation: This monitor makes good games look incredible.

$899; us.aoc.com

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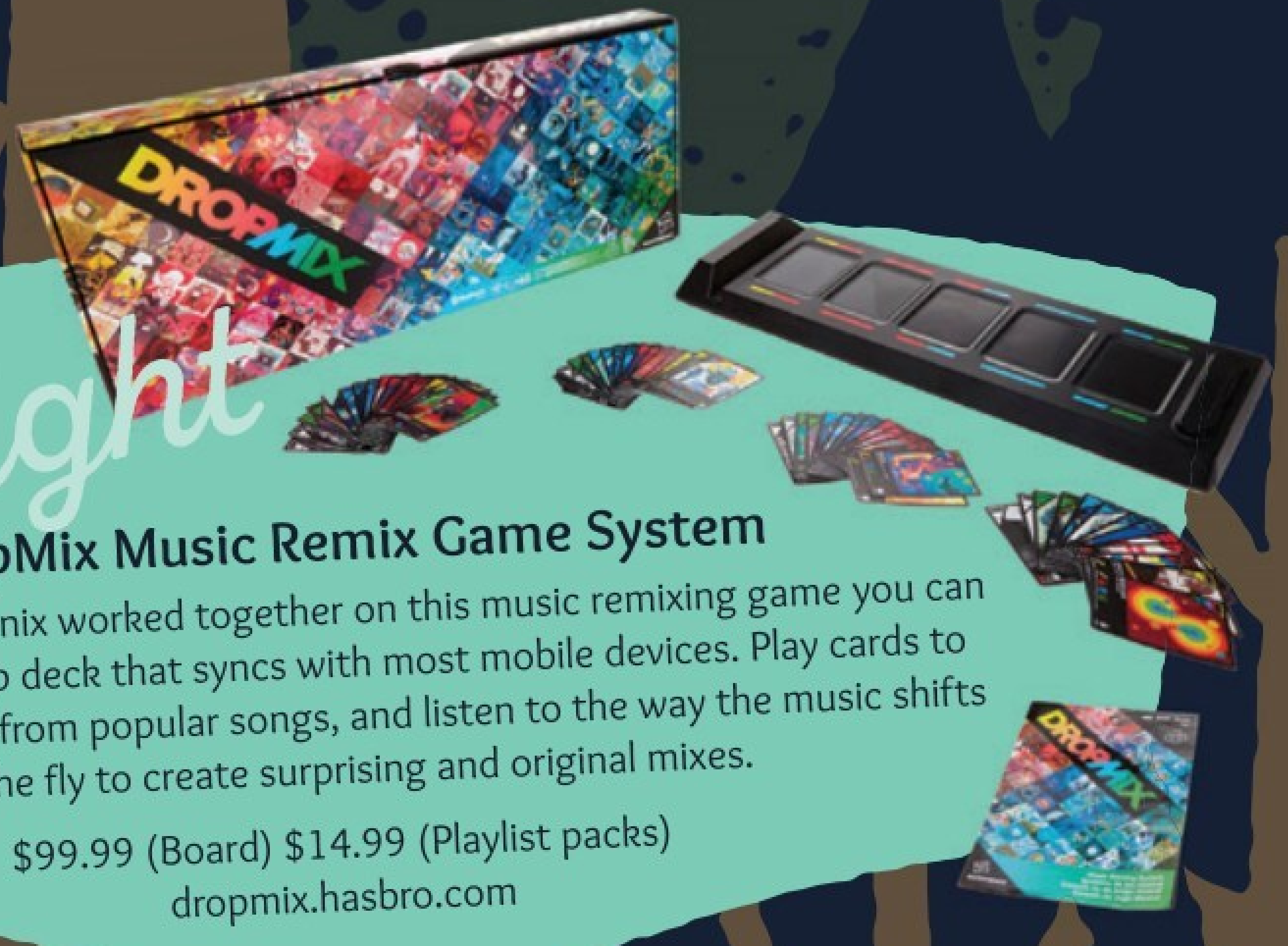
TO GO



Spotlight

DropMix Music Remix Game System

Hasbro and Harmonix worked together on this music remixing game you can play on a tabletop deck that syncs with most mobile devices. Play cards to combine snippets from popular songs, and listen to the way the music shifts on the fly to create surprising and original mixes.

$99.99 (Board) $14.99 (Playlist packs)
dropmix.hasbro.com

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YOUR GIFT CARD HERE
5
NINTENDO SWITCH
SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY
6
7

① **B.J. Blazkowitz's Faux Leather Jacket** $98.00; store.bethsoft.com ② **Transformers Titan Class Trypticon** $149; hasbro.com ③ **Pokémon Traditional Ukiyo-e Woodblock Prints** $450; pokemoncenter.com ④ **Marvel Guardians of the Galaxy Headphone Necklace from RockLove** $64.99; heruniverse.com ⑤ **Love Pop Pop-up Gift Cards** Starting at $10.00; lovepopcards.com ⑥ **Nintendo Switch Super Mario Odyssey Bundle** $379; gamestop.com ⑦ **Alice in Wonderland Book Scarf** $48.00; etsy.com/shop/storiarts

December2017

GAME RELEASES

Friday 01
- Doom VFR (PSVR, Vive)
- Xenoblade Chronicles 2 (Switch)

Tuesday 05
- Dead Rising 4: Frank's Big Package (PS4)
- Steep: Road to the Olympics (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Wednesday 06
- Bravo Team (PSVR)

Friday 08
- Hello Neighbor (Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 12
- Fallout 4 VR (Vive)
- PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (Xbox One)
- Resident Evil 7: Gold Edition (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Okami HD (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❶

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 01
- Dark (Netflix)

Wednesday 06
- Happy (Syfy)

Friday 15
- Star Wars: The Last Jedi (theaters) ❷

Friday 22
- Bright (Netflix)
- Downsizing (theaters)
- Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle (theaters)
- Pitch Perfect 3 (theaters)

Friday 29
- The Greatest Showman (theaters)

GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 06

DC Comics Holiday Special 2017 ❸

Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, and Flash deliver a message of hope for the holidays. This oversized comic features other supplemental stories such as the Teen Titans taking on the ghosts of Christmas past, Sgt. Rock fighting Nazis on HanuKah, and Swamp Thing doing something festive.

Thursday 07

The Game Awards

Geoff Keighley is back with another night of honoring the best video games and creators of the year. We also may see some new game announcements and footage of the biggest games coming in 2018.

Saturday 09

PlayStation Experience 2017

The Last of Us: Part II and Uncharted: The Lost Legacy debuted at last year's PlayStation Experience. Can we expect similar fireworks from Sony's announcements this year? With few surprises emerging at E3, we have a feeling Sony saved them for this PlayStation-focused expo. Regardless of what is unveiled, this should be a great show for getting new looks at the latest games coming to PS4. The expo is held in Anaheim, CA, and runs through the weekend.

Wednesday 13

X-Men: Grand Design

Ed Piskor is combing through all of the X-Men comics to create a comprehensive retelling of X-Men's past, present, and future. This series should serve as a great jumping-on point for newcomers. The first issue is 48 pages. ◈

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» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
Capcom

» DEVELOPER
Capcom

» RELEASE
January 26 (Console)
TBD (PC)

THRILL OF THE HUNT

The Monster Hunter series is back on console in a massive – and deadly – all-new adventure. Thankfully, Capcom is arming Monster Hunter: World players with the tools they'll need to be successful

BY JEFF CORK

MONSTER HUNTER FANS LIKE TO TALK.

Ask them about their favorite series, and you'll hear breathless tales of their favorite hunts, show-and-tell presentations about their most prized gear, and – almost without fail – the final proof of their loyalty: the number of hours they've spent playing the game, measured in hundreds or even thousands of hours. Then comes the next wave of conversation, in which they tell you about spreadsheets, handwritten logs, and hours spent poring over message boards.

As with many other objects of our affection, the Monster Hunter series revels in keeping players at arm's length, only truly revealing its appeal to those who spend hours chasing after it or who know someone who has already been indoctrinated into its ranks. The loop of killing monsters, carving off chunks of their bodies, and then crafting weapons and armor from those pieces is dead simple, but its arcane gameplay systems and unwieldy menus can make it difficult for new players to fully immerse themselves in the monster-slaying action. With Monster Hunter: World, that's all about to change.

A FRESH START

More than seven years have passed since the series' last console-first game, Monster Hunter Tri, was released on Wii. Since then, the franchise has made a comfortable nest on portable systems. Thanks to the limited capabilities of the 3DS, elements such as map segmentation have followed a rigid, predictable pattern. When Capcom set out to develop an all-new game for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One players, the development team took full advantage of the freedom that newer, more-powerful hardware offered. Those decisions have wide-reaching effects throughout the entirety of Monster Hunter: World.

The source of most of the change is significant: Rather than divide maps into a series of smaller zones with loading screens between each transition, the team built a series of massive, seamless maps. That decision meant they had to fundamentally re-examine nearly everything else in the Monster Hunter formula. "You can't just take away the loading zones and then say the gameplay is going to be better now, because our gameplay was always designed around that limitation," says producer Ryozo Tsujimoto. "To then break down the loading zones and have a single seamless map or stage for every area, you have to have a gameplay concept that makes sense for a single large map, otherwise you might as well not bother removing the zones."

The concept they landed on is making the monsters feel as though they are firmly part of the world, and not just walking loot caches. Each map in Monster Hunter: World is its own ecosystem, with various plants, creatures, predators, and more interacting together in an intricate balance. Startle a grazing herd, and the animals may flee into the path of a hungry monster, who then gets an unexpected meal. Bump into that well-fed monster later, and it may have access to attacks that it wouldn't have had with an empty stomach. Run away from that monster, and you both might encounter an even larger beast – giving you a chance to escape or providing some unexpected support in the battle. Watching a monster have an effect on the larger world is a huge shift for the series, and Capcom took that opportunity to further push the boundaries.

"Since we're doing so much revision and rethinking and reconsideration, then let's revisit what perhaps is causing some kind of hurdle for people to get on board," Tsujimoto says. "The core gameplay is still absolutely Monster Hunter – we're not going to change that – but we wanted you to be able to get into the door in the first place and open it wider."

We recently visited Capcom headquarters in Osaka, Japan, and spent nearly 10 hours playing Monster Hunter: World both solo and in a four-person group. Our session left us with a lot of information to process, and it's not possible to share absolutely everything we saw within these pages. Instead, I'm breaking down our visit into three composite hunts that provide an informative overview of what players can expect from this exciting new world when the game launches in January. And I'll just tip my hand straight away: It's a lot of fun.

HUNT
#1
GREAT JAGRAS

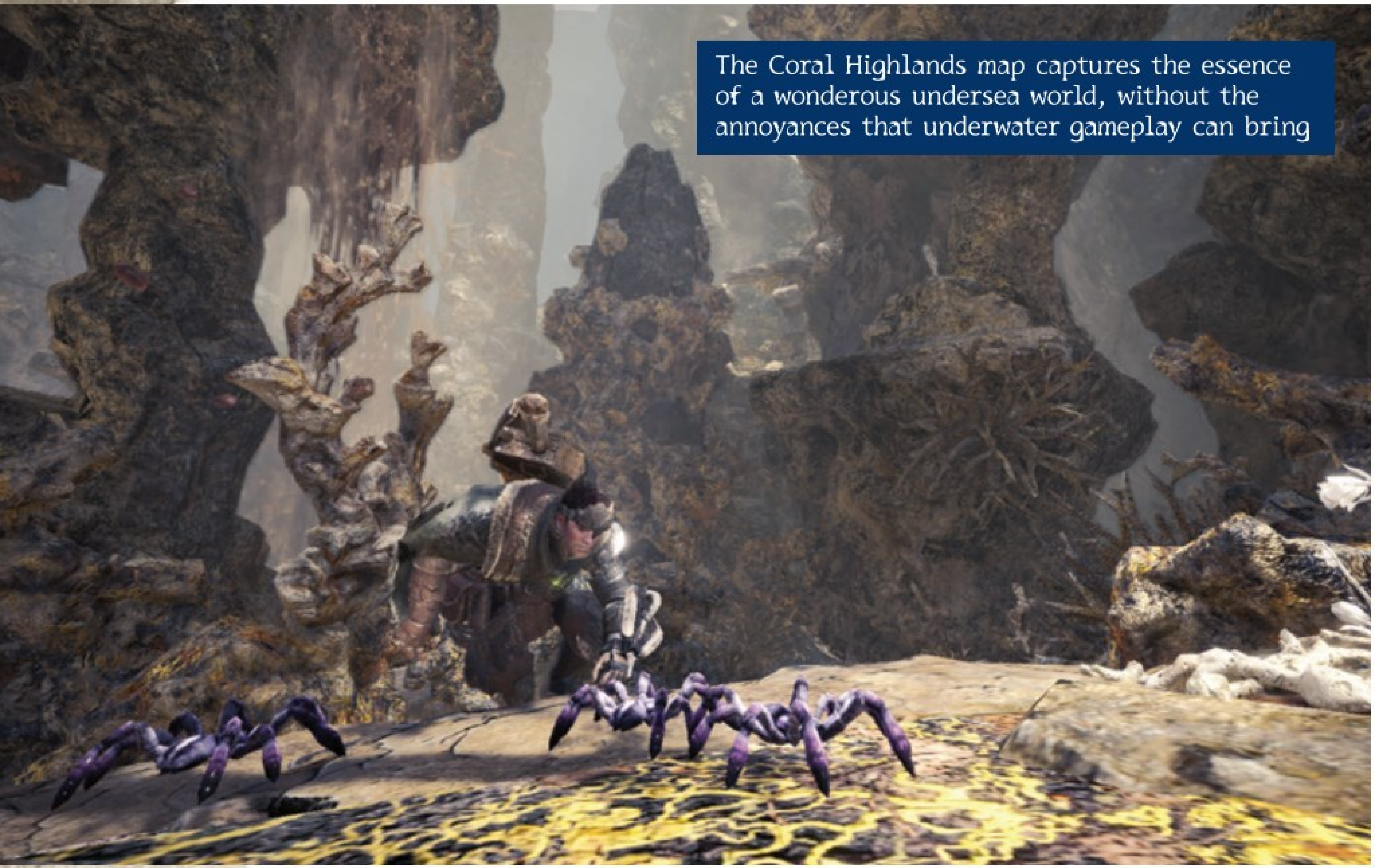
Our first big hunt started as a routine patrol mission, where we are tasked with thinning out a herd of Kestodon that was getting a little too comfortable near our expedition's home base. The thick-headed beasts weren't particularly challenging, and my cat-like Palico companion and I finished the objective without much trouble. I have to give more than a little credit to the revamped light bowgun, which is a joy to use.

In previous Monster Hunter games, bowguns had a Resident Evil 4 quality to them, where your hunter would plant her feet whenever she took aim – no running and gunning allowed. That's changed in Monster Hunter: World, thanks in part to the change in map design and the ability for monsters to freely roam between zones.

"For the player to be able to tackle that, we had to make a lot of the player movements seamless as well," says game director Yuya Tokuda. "With the bow and all of the other weapons, the animations are a lot more fluid this time. So, for example, while a player is charging an arrow, they're allowed to move around now to make it a more fluid hunting experience." I tell Tokuda that it's going to be hard to go back to the previous bowgun controls, and he comically clamps his mouth shut with his hands. "I'm not going to say anything," he says, laughing.

Now that the Kestodon problem is taken care of, our hunt transforms into a mystery. A veteran NPC hunter is our extra companion on this quest, and he explains that we may be facing a larger problem: a Great Jagras. I'd seen smaller specimens during my travels, and didn't find the iguana-inspired creatures particularly memorable. They were among the most aggressive creatures I'd encountered in the early game, but they were also fairly weak. Our guide tells us to be on the alert as we track our prey, however, and who am I to argue? I stoop near a set of massive footprints and interact with the track. The bugs I keep in a little waist-mounted cage spring into action, lighting a path on the ground that leads to the next footprint – and hopefully the source of those prints.

Tracking is a big tweak to the Monster Hunter formula, and it's bound to generate controversy. Large monsters such as the Great Jagras leave clues to their whereabouts in the world, and every track, table scrap, scale, feature, and other physical memento leads you closer to their location. As you interact with these clues, you fill up a meter associated with the beast on that particular instanced version of the world. When it levels up, your flies can track it farther. There isn't a way to turn off this visual helper, though players can ignore the tracks they spot if they'd prefer a purer experience. For the time being, I welcome any navigational aids that I can get while I'm still learning how to get around in this giant world.



The Coral Highlands map captures the essence of a wonderous undersea world, without the annoyances that underwater gameplay can bring

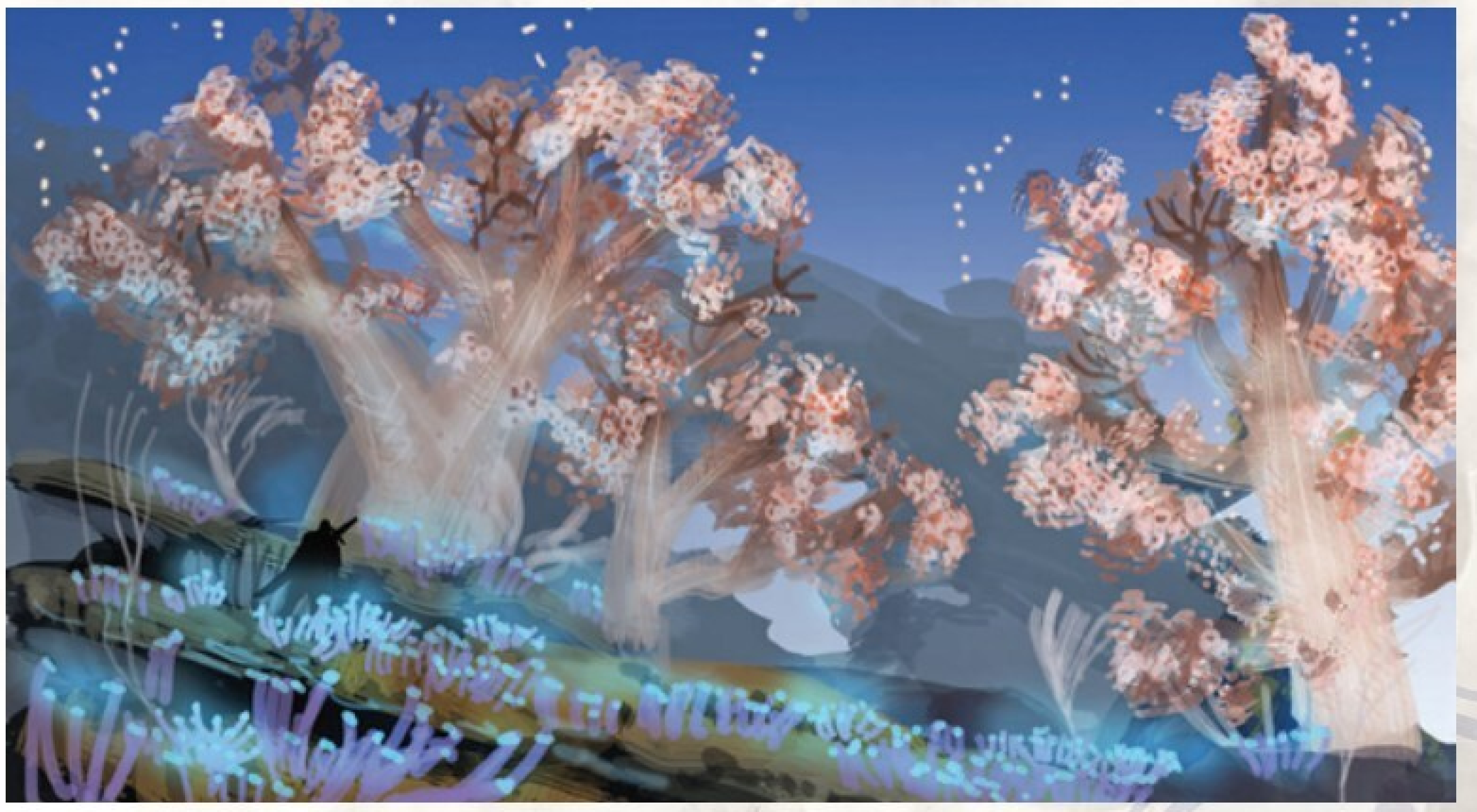
I dutifully follow the illuminated path through the Ancient Forest's undergrowth until Great Jagras emerges. "Great" might be overstating things a bit; "big goofball" is more accurate, but that doesn't make him any less dangerous. The granddaddy of all Jagrases keeps the similar reptilian frame and yellow coloring, but his head is adorned with an ostentatious set of dreadlock-like tendrils. They whip around the air as he charges my location. Fortunately, I dodge out of the way just in time. My Palico swats at him a few times while I line up my targeting reticle for optimal damage-dealing distance. I fire at a few different spots on his body to get a sense of where to best focus my attacks. As each bolt connects, a number pops up showing how much damage my attacks are generating – another new feature in World.

"We don't want to put an HP gauge at the top of the screen, but damage numbers are a reasonably elegant solution to provide the information that players need to know if they're being effective, or if they're not, how should they adapt their strategy," Tsujimoto says. "We added those in, and I think it's a great way for people to tell, 'I should be doing this, I shouldn't be doing this.' Naturally, plenty of Monster Hunter veterans might not want those numbers, but you can turn them off if you feel like it's a challenge to your Monster Hunter pride. Get rid of them, and the gameplay is the same."

Great Jagras' head adornments may generate a lot of attention, but he's also in possession of a tail. I'm not the most hardcore Monster Hunter player in the room, but I know that slicing off those kinds of parts is a good way to get extra crafting materials. I focus on Great Jagras' rear for a while, switching to ammo that deals slicing damage in hopes of separating the beast's tail – a move I learn later was a waste of time. All the while, I do my best to avoid the monster's wild swiping attacks. After a few minutes, Great Jagras decides it's best to retreat, and it speeds away. In previous games, I'd have to play a game of hide-and-seek, particularly since I didn't hit him with a paintball before he fled. Fortunately, my friendly bugs replace that somewhat bizarre relic, and I'm able to chase him down to a nearby beach.

All that fighting must have made the monster hungry, and I interrupt him as he finishes eating a Kestodon – swallowing the creature in one giant gulp. If Great Jagras looked comical before, now he looks positively ridiculous. The monster's belly is now distended and looks as though it could burst. It's no longer the speedy lizard it was before; it visibly struggles to pull himself forward with his forelimbs. The meal must not have agreed with him, as it's given him the ability to belch out projectiles of noxious-looking goo. I'm surprised by the new form, and I get hit by his first volley. That moment of indignity is followed up by another hit, as he rolls his massive body right over me. My Palico sees that I'm in trouble, and he rushes over with a quick (and unexpected) heal.

Now that I know what to expect from Great Jagras Part II, he's a lot easier to handle. I sidestep his crush attempts, and knock him over on his side. During the battle a few Aptonoths wander into the action and get a few hits in at Great Jagras with their spiny tails. Finally, I/we slay the beast. I hunch over his carcass and loot his scaly body. To commemorate the achievement, I use part of Great Jagras' body to craft a new set of armor for my Palico. It makes my buddy look like he's wearing a ghillie suit, albeit one made out of a weird lizard.



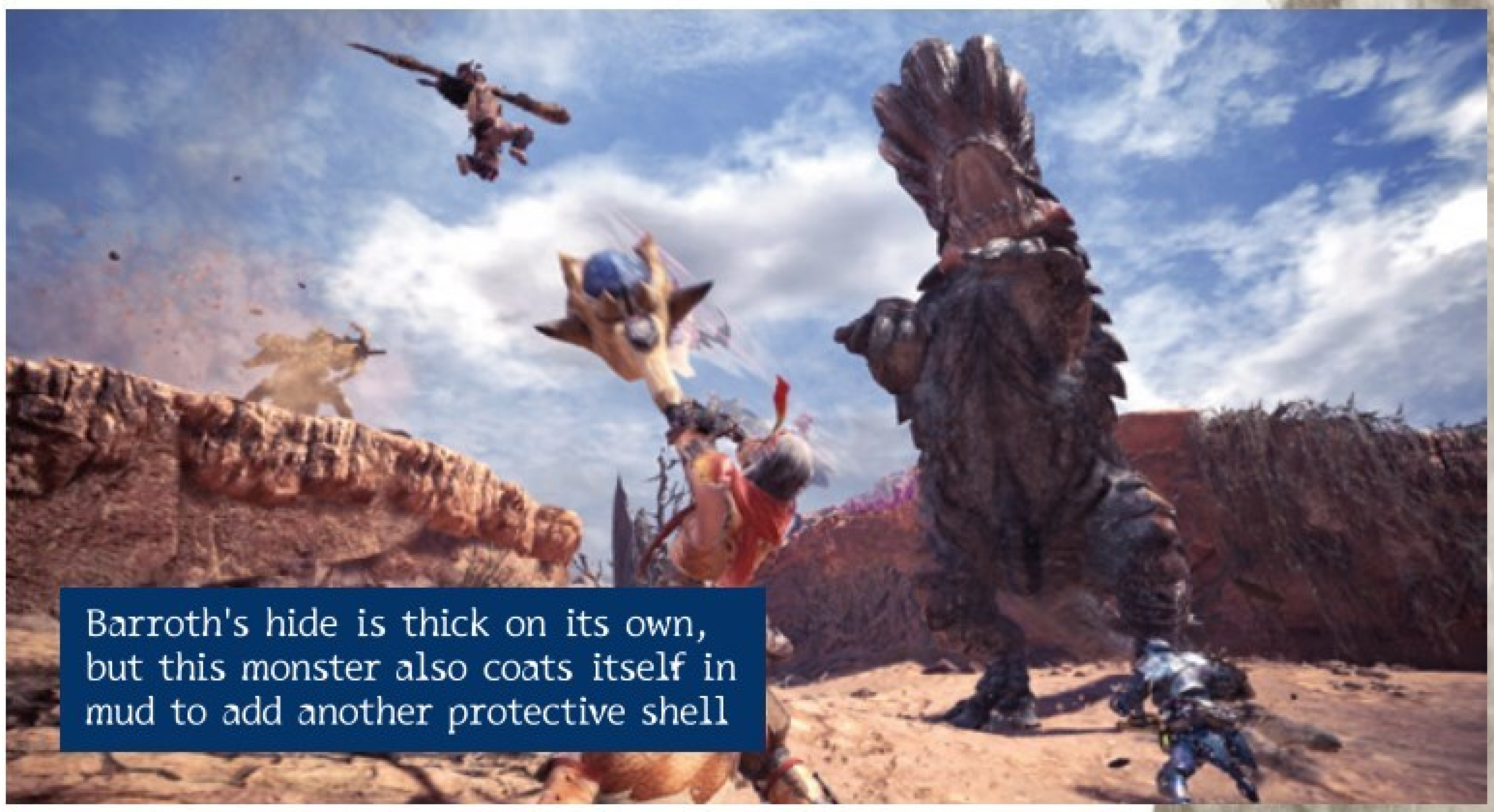
THE CORAL HIGHLANDS

Our demo was split between two of the game's maps, but players who have been keeping up on their Monster Hunter: World news know of a third. Capcom streamed the Coral Highlands extensively during the Tokyo Game Show, and its fantastic "underwater vistas, but on dry land" setting shows that World isn't just going to replicate Earth-like reality. We got an exclusive presentation of the map during our Capcom visit, focused on this bizarre new landscape.

"The concept was that players will have been through the Ancient Forest and then they'll have been to the Wildspire Waste, which are relatively realistic stages," says Kaname Fujioka, Monster Hunter: World's executive director and art director. They look like they could take place somewhere on Earth, albeit on a large scale. Once you got used to that and became accustomed to that, we wanted to surprise players– not just in terms of visuals, but also gameplay."

The team took inspiration from cherry-blossom trees and coral reefs, creating a unique hybrid that provides a glimpse of undersea-style visuals without the bothersome gameplay that often accompanies underwater levels. Designing the map was more complex than simply draining the sea. "You can't just recreate how exact underwater life works whenever you're going to be transferring the stage to land," Fujioka says. The team previously visited a national park in Chile, and they were able to use their learnings of how high winds and thermals affect a landscape.

One of the stage's memorable new monsters is the Paoluma, a furry white bat with an inflatable neck pouch. "His rather unique design is informed by how he would fit into his own area," Fujioka says. "He's able to use the currents to travel around, and that's why his design is like this."



Barroth's hide is thick on its own, but this monster also coats itself in mud to add another protective shell

HUNT #2

JYURATODUS

WITH SPECIAL GUESTS

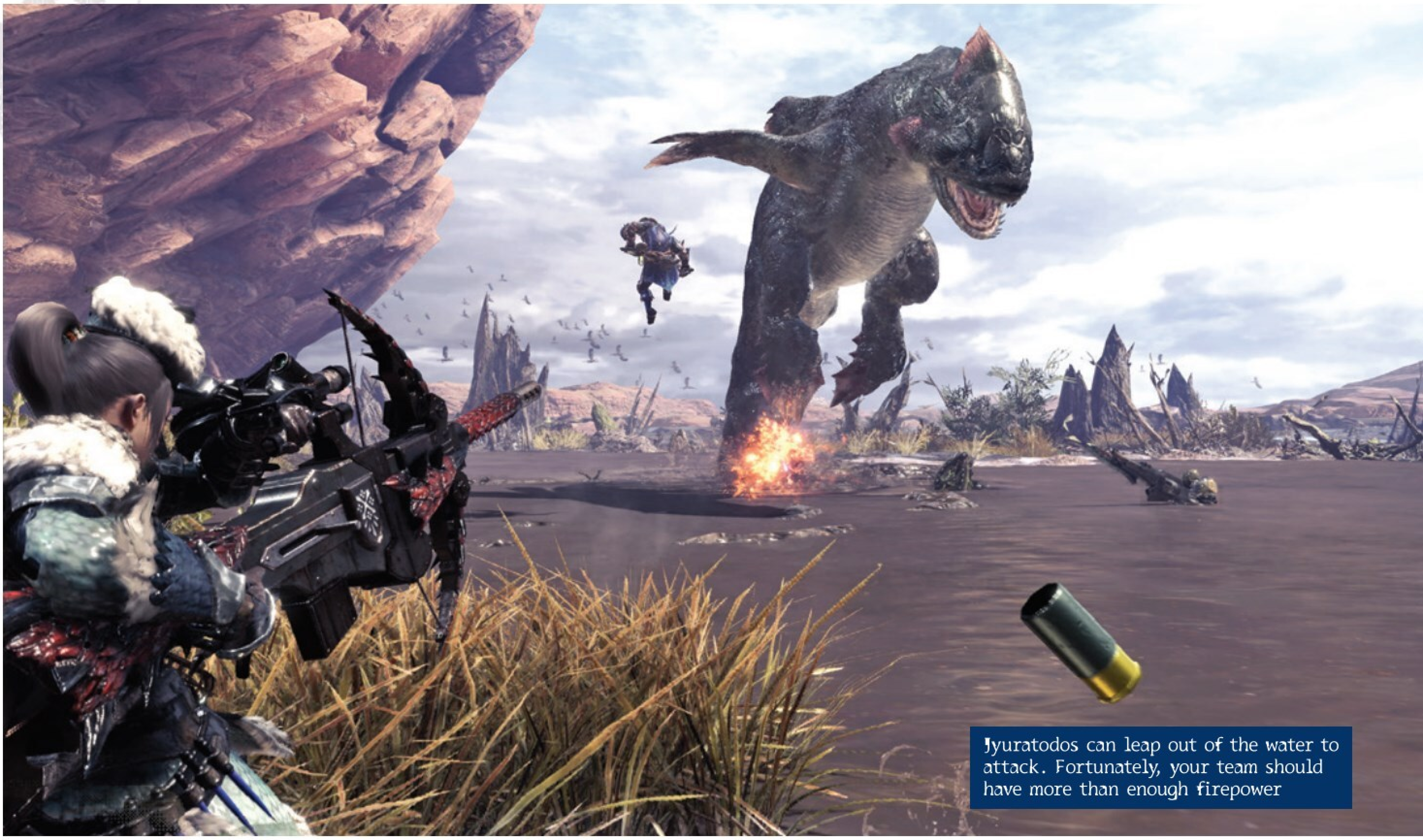
My next hunt takes me from the Ancient Forest to a completely different ecosystem, the Wildspire Waste. That doesn't mean that there isn't an underlying connection between those areas, however. Kaname Fujioka, the game's executive director and art director, points out that the same waters course throughout the world, affecting the environments in different ways. The rivers and streams that feed the great tree – the Ancient Forest's dominant feature – flow into the Wildspire Waste and create the muddy swamps that are home to our next featured monster. Jyuratodus is a massive fish, whose closest real-world counterparts may be a monstrous hybrid between a salamander and a coelacanth (that big lunker you may know from Animal Crossing). In short, he's not something you want to solo your first time, if you can avoid it. Fortunately, I brought friends.

Monster Hunter: World's next template-shattering change is how the line between single and multiplayer content has been removed. Before, you had discrete questlines depending on whether you were playing solo or with a group of friends. Now, the quests are the same, regardless of how you choose to take them. When you take on a quest, you can choose the number of players you'd like to accommodate. If you get yourself in a jam, however, you can fire off an emergency SOS flare to open it up to friendly players online – even if you weren't planning on playing multiplayer from the outset.

Those flares aren't necessary, however, because we are prepared. I say goodbye to my Palico (he only joins you when you're playing solo or with one other player), and we hit the dusty trails of the Wildspire Waste. The map is completely different looking than the Ancient Forest, and its high-walled canyons and rocky outcrops make it different to traverse, as well. Our group splits up into four directions as we track our piscine prey. Even though the areas aren't divided into zones with loading, they're still visually segmented into numbered zones when you pull up your map – perfect for coordinating with teammates with barks like, "He's over in zone 4," or "Stay away from zone 6, big monster in there!"

Splitting up is the right call; we find Jyuratodus within a few short minutes. Considering he's basically a fish, it only stands to reason that he was in a pool of water. Go figure. Unfortunately for us, it's more of a gloppy mud than the stuff you'd want to drink. Wading through the mess is slow going, which leaves us vulnerable to attacks from the Gajau, large carnivorous fish. The marsh is dotted with several tiny islands, which we stand on to get a better bead on our ultimate prize.

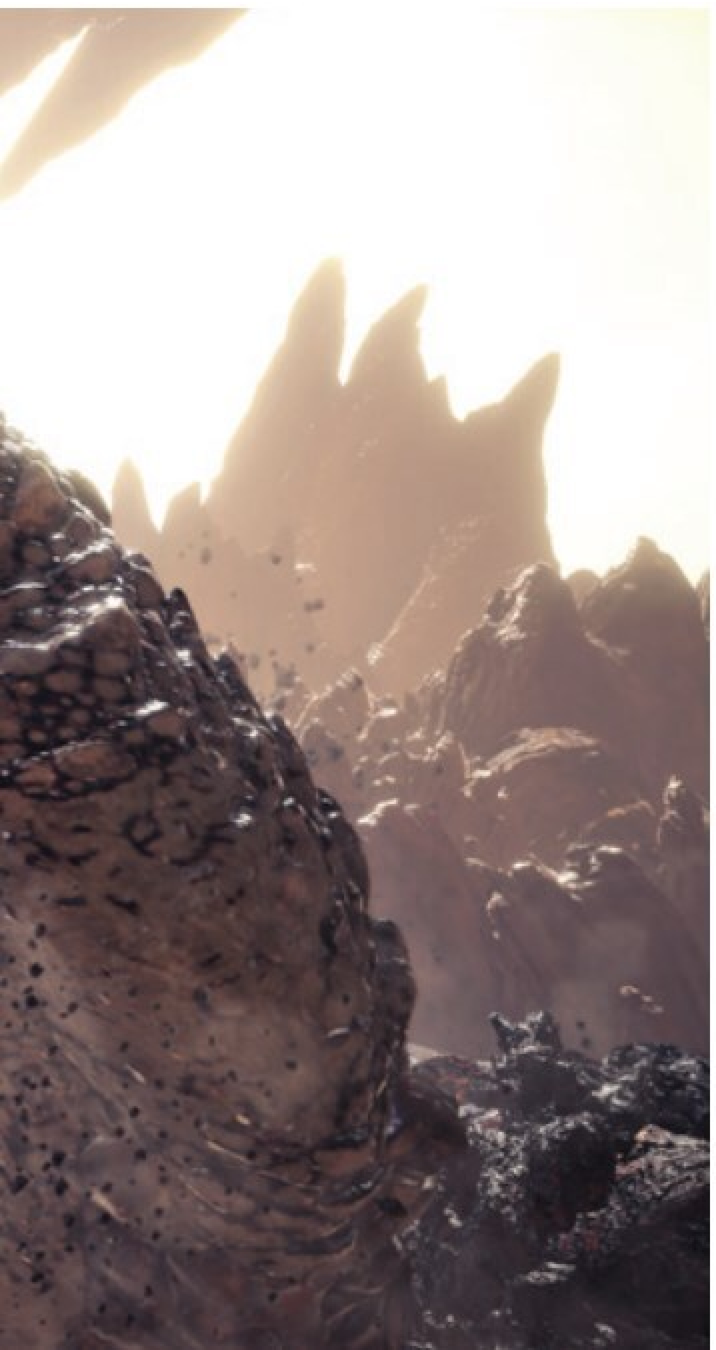
Jyuratodus is a fishy creature, but we're determined to make

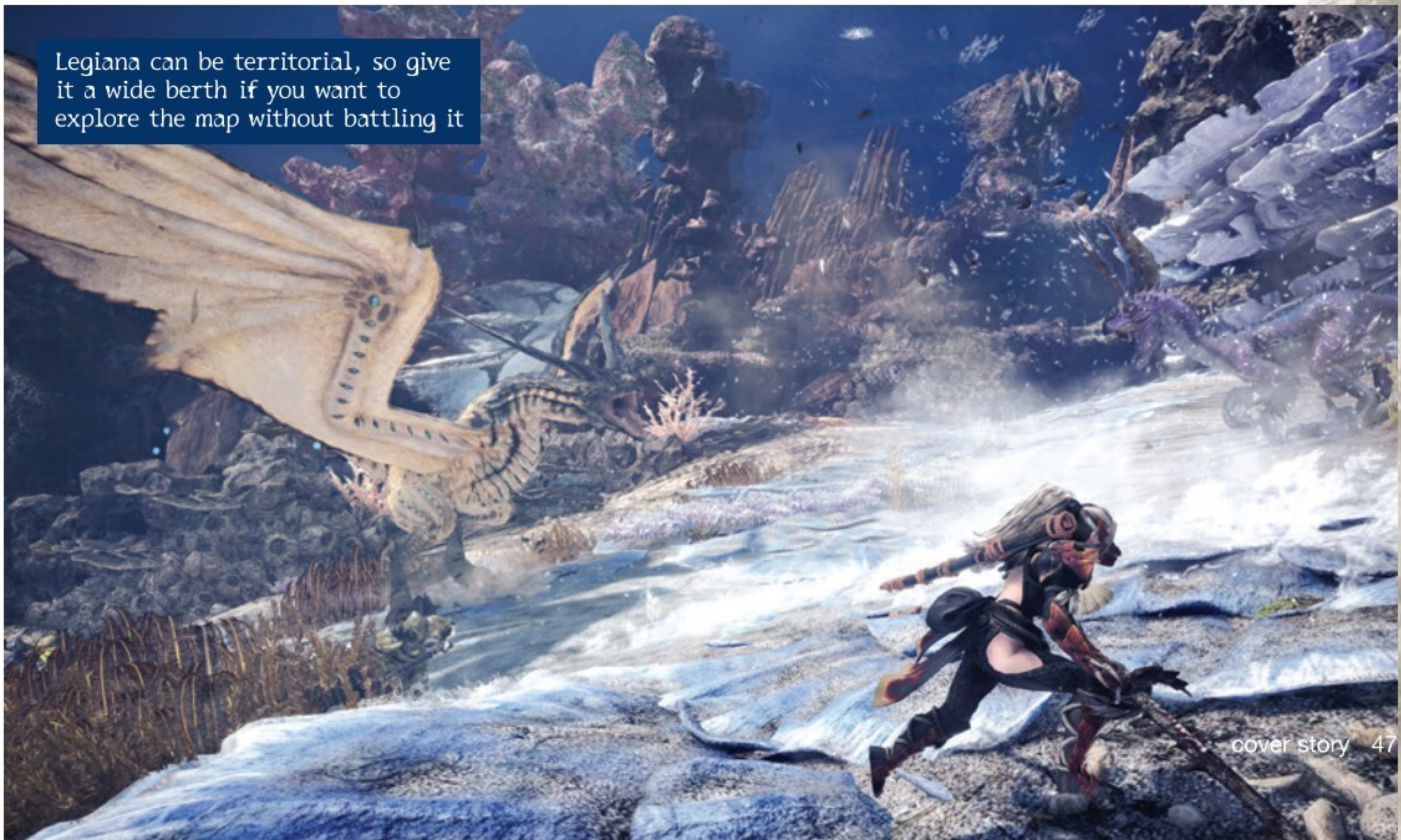


Jyuratodos can leap out of the water to attack. Fortunately, your team should have more than enough firepower

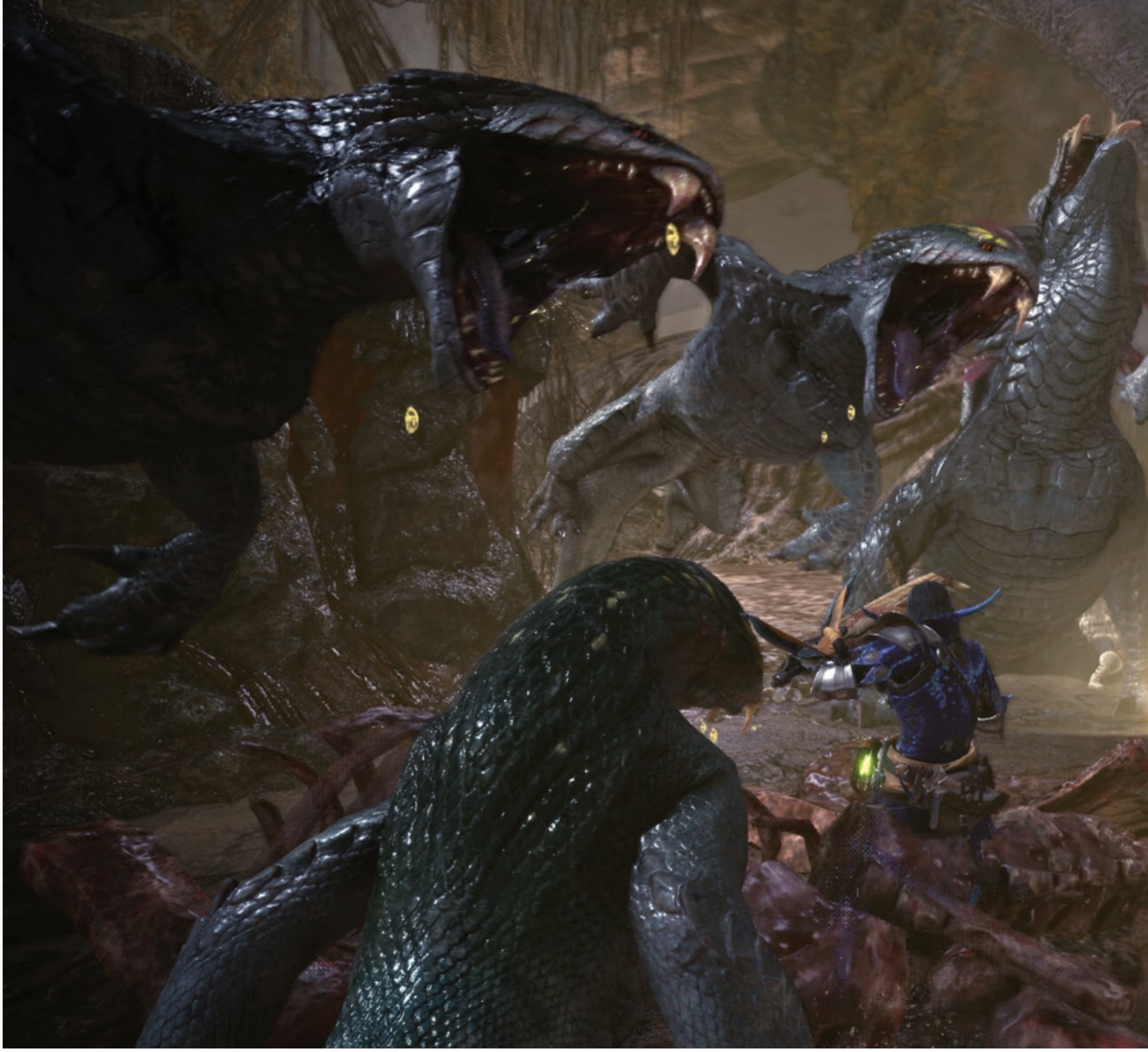
sure he's not the one that gets away. His arsenal of attacks includes diving below and emerging from the depths, spewing piles of sticky muck that hinders movement, and trying to chow down on us with his massive jaws. Playing solo is thrilling, but grouping up is even better. Jyuratodus' attention is split between each of us, allowing us to be a little more aggressive while he's focused on the others. My favorite part of the light bowgun, aside from being able to move and fire, is in its alternate attack. I can place up to three mines onto the ground, which can be repeatedly detonated when they take damage – whether it's from me, my teammates, or the monsters themselves. These mines wreak havoc on enemies, outputting 10 times my usual punishment. Because of that, I take risks like rushing close to enemies so the mines help my teammates' attacks do even more damage. I wasn't expecting that from a ranged weapon, and it's great.

Taking those risks means I'm also frequently taking a fair bit of damage. I'm prepared, however, and my inventory is filled with potions. You're no longer locked into a drinking animation while you quaff your rejuvenating beverages, either; you can still walk while you restore your health, allowing you to move out of the way when something like Jyuratodus takes a liking to you and wants to get closer. Getting potions is easier than ever, as well. You can dive into your crafting menu and flag frequently used recipes to autocraft when you have the required ingredients. That way, my normal potions were automatically upgraded to mega potions whenever I ran past a beehive and snatched up some honey.





Legiana can be territorial, so give it a wide berth if you want to explore the map without battling it



Thanks to our coordinated attacks (and, if I'm being honest here, my mines), Jyuratodus eventually decides he's had enough of us. He runs up a gently sloped river, on to dry land. We give chase, only to stumble onto an old-fashioned monster party. Unfortunately, it's a surprise party. And it's for us.

Now, we're not only facing the Jyuratodus, but also have to contend with two other formidable monsters: Rathian and Barroth. Rathian, as Monster Hunter veterans know, is a powerful flying wyvern when encountered by herself, let alone as part of a group with two other larger monsters. I'd battled a Barroth on an earlier hunt and found him to be a tough opponent. He's a chisel-headed quadruped with a tendency to ram anything that makes him mad. He also has an interesting, and practical, affection for mud that I couldn't help but notice.

"What he'll do is he'll use that mud to his advantage," Fujioka says. "When you saw him rolling around in the mud, he's actually coating himself in the mud so that it hardens and it becomes a protective layer on his skin. He'll also use the mud to get invaders from encroaching on his territory."

We may have technically outnumbered the monstrous trio, but they definitely have a size advantage on us. Luckily for us, the beasts don't get along with each other. Barroth rams Jyuratodus hard enough to immobilize our target, knocking a few chunks of crafting materials off the creature in the process. Meanwhile, Rathian hovers nearby spewing flames at Barroth's backside. It's tempting to watch the thing unfold like a kaiju-style monster movie, but we have quest orders to complete. Barroth makes a few charges at me, but I've learned to give him a wide berth when he dips his head down. As always, part of the fun of Monster Hunter: World is getting to know each beast's tell, and then reacting (or anticipating) accordingly.

It's a chaotic scene, and our coordination suffers a bit. Only a couple of us faint during the battle, but with only three lives divided between the group it makes the last few moments particularly tense. If one more of us loses all his health, we'll have to start from scratch. Mercifully, the Jyuratodus retreats back to its original habitat and Barroth and Rathian get bored and split into different directions. A more experienced hunting party would split up and clean them up individually, but we decide to prioritize filleting Jyuratodus and calling it a day.

KOOKY COLLABORATIONS

The Monster Hunter series has been home to a host of crossovers, from series including Metal Gear and Dead Rising to more bizarre pairings such as Pizza Hut and Hello Kitty. Monster Hunter: World continues the crossover tradition, too.

"We can say that we're working with a lot of different companies, and sometimes we'll have characters from other companies collaborating with them, bringing them into the world," says Kaname Fujioka, Monster Hunter: World's executive director and art director. "There's a lot of cool stuff planned that we can't talk about right now. If any of the past titles are any indication, you know what kind of collaborations we've done. It will get weird."

One such collaboration was revealed at Sony's Paris Games Week presentation: PS4 players will be able to play as Horizon Zero Dawn's Aloy.

Hunts can – and often do – turn into chaotic free-for-alls

The maps in Monster Hunter: World are bigger than ever, but a new tracking system makes finding your prey easier

BARROTH

PAOLUMU

PUKEI-PUKEI

TOBI-KADACHI

HUNT #3

ANJANATH

The monsters we'd encountered in our previous hunts were challenging, but not impossible. Anjanath is different. Essentially, this titanic foe who looks like a T-rex crossed with a vulture acts as a gear check in the early game. If you haven't been judiciously improving your armor and weapons as you've been playing, you're in for a rude awakening in the form of a string of ugly one-shot deaths. That's the fate our group meets the first few times we encounter him, so we disband with the promise of meeting up again once we gear up.

Monster Hunter: World's quality-of-life improvements are sprinkled liberally throughout the experience, and they're especially noticeable in the gear-crafting system. Grinding for materials is a fundamental part of the series' past, and that's not changing with World. Players are better armed with much-needed information as they grind. Specifically, weapon and armor trees are communicated ahead of time, so you can see what components you need beforehand rather than be surprised when new crafting options pop up after you finally have the requisite parts. You can also add items to a wishlist, which provides onscreen indicators when you collect items that are part of a weapon or armor piece's recipe – with a final popup appearing when you have all of the items. Let's be real – most players were already getting this information from FAQs, and not surfacing that information in the game menus was strange.

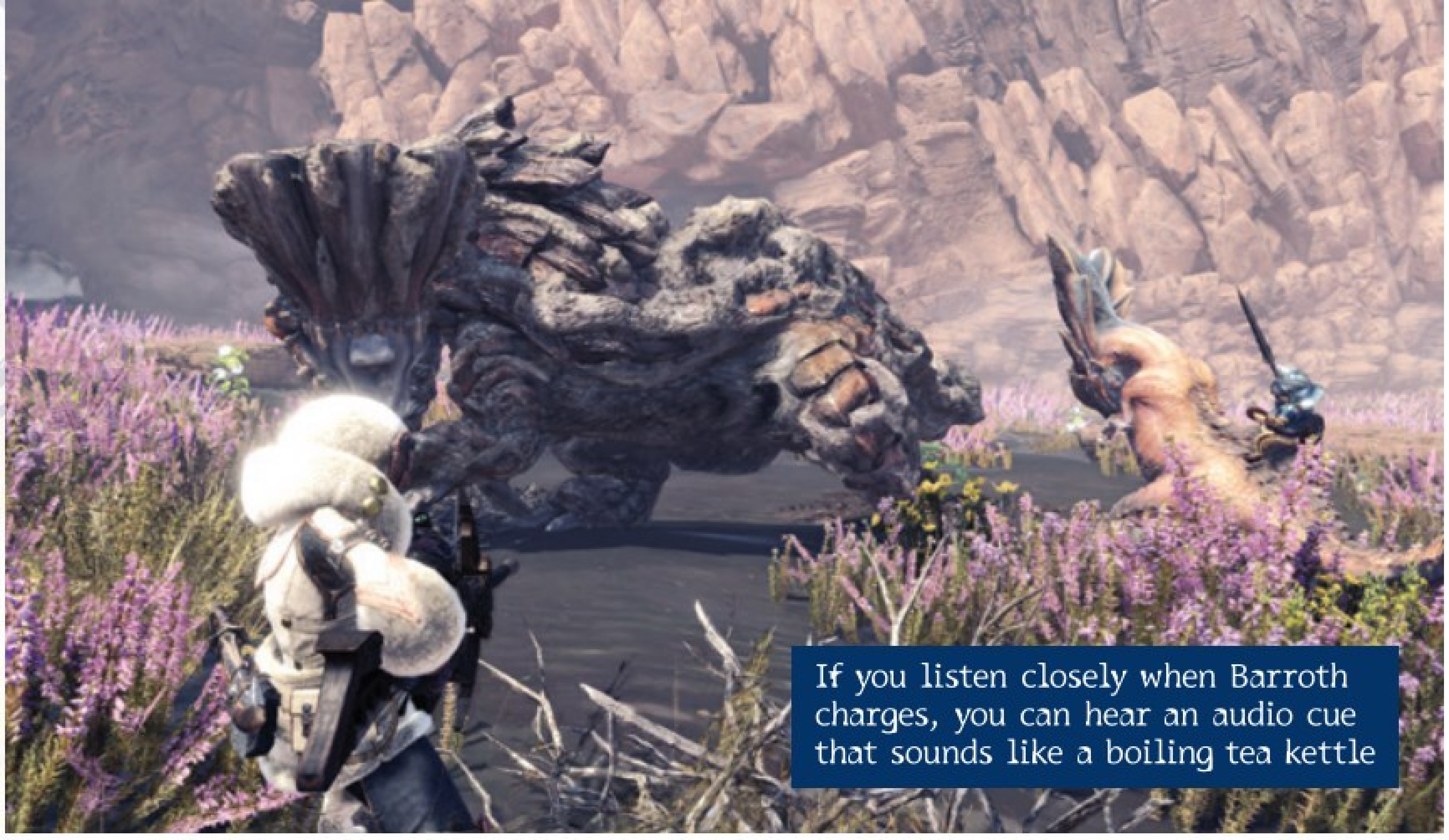
Additionally, as players track and fight monsters, their knowledge of those beasts is added to an in-game compendium. Details such as what parts are available from what monsters, what parts can be detached from monsters, elemental weaknesses, and more will show up, making you a more effective hunter in the long run.

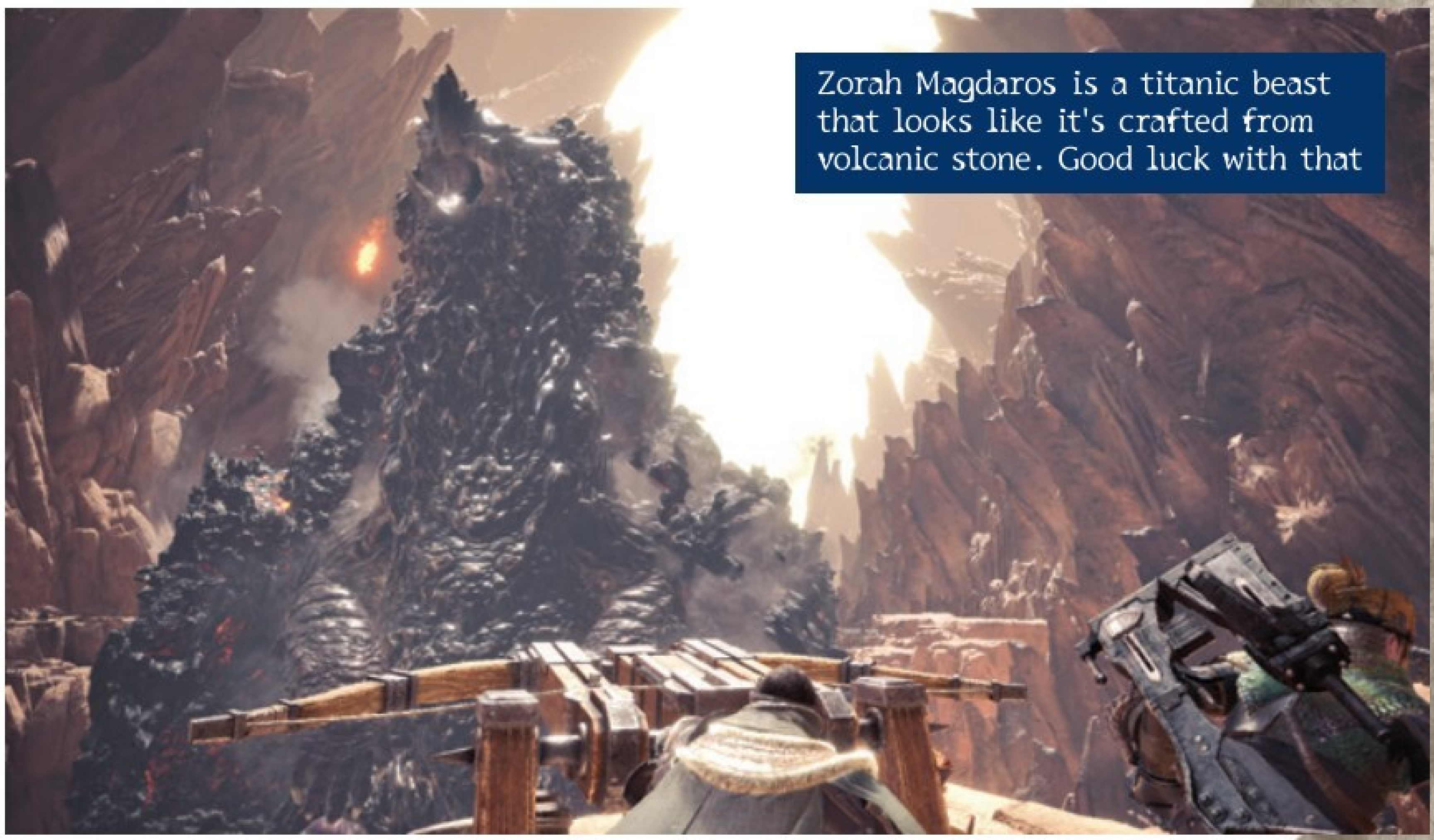
Looking at the armor tree, I could tell that getting a set of Jyuratodus-themed gear would provide a significant defense boost. With that in mind, I hop into the Wildspire Waste without taking a quest ahead of time to do some

As if the mighty Anjanath wasn't tough enough, of course it can blast fire from its mouth

MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD ON PC?

In addition to coming to PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, Monster Hunter: World is being developed for PC. Those players are going to have to be a little patient, however. "PC is certainly a huge market when you look at it from a global stance, and we've heard demands or requests, begging, from PC gamers who really want to play Monster Hunter," says producer Ryozo Tsujimoto. "The PC version is going to come out after the console versions, which come out next January. This is our first time making a game like this for PC, so we want to take the time to get it right and meet the needs of PC players. Please tell them I think it'll be worth the wait, so please do hang in there because we're going to do our best to make the PC version of the game." As for other details, such as whether it'll run at 60 fps or will be frame-locked at 30, Capcom says we'll have to wait for that info, too.


If you listen closely when Barroth charges, you can hear an audio cue that sounds like a boiling tea kettle


Zorah Magdaros is a titanic beast that looks like it's crafted from volcanic stone. Good luck with that

freeform exploration and Jyuratodus hunting. It's a nice break from the nonstop questing we'd been doing before, and I enjoy wandering around and learning more about the map. It is still loaded with monsters, but I am free to do things like collect mushrooms to increase the quality of food our town's chef can prepare or steal a wyvern egg and collect a bounty for my trouble.

After a few hours, our group meets up again for our final hunt together. When we first spot Anjanath, we see a quick cutscene showing the beast in mid-meal, stomping around with a Great Jagras clutched in his mighty jaws. It's weird to see how small that former boss looks compared to Anjanath, and intimidating to know that we are somehow expected to take down this behemoth. Now is the time to see if time hunting Jyuratodus has paid pay off.

Anjanath indeed hits hard, but if he does connect with an attack we can slink off and heal up before taking fatal damage – a significant difference from our first tentative attempts. I keep a reasonable distance from the beast while my teammates hack at it with their great swords, hunting horn, and dual blades. When a teammate mounts the beast, I run close and place mines near it while it is still distracted.

It seems a little unfair, but you can also use the environments themselves in battle. For instance, in one centerpiece area of the map, vines hanging way overhead have a mass of rocks in their tangles. Hit the vines while a monster is beneath them, and they're in for a significant headache. Another area features a wild cluster of vegetation that can ensnare unsuspecting monsters, leaving them open for coordinated strikes. Our team takes full advantage of the environments as we chase the Anjanath (and it chases us) across the Ancient Forest.

Perhaps when I'm more skilled, I'd consider capturing an Anjanath alive. Unfortunately for this specimen, we don't have the patience, time, or expertise for that kind of a hunt. He finally hits the forest floor with a mighty thud, and we gather near his body for our prizes. I silently thank Anjanath for his sacrifice, knowing that – at the very least – he will make for a cool hat.

Be sure to visit Gameinformer.com/monsterhunter for a month of expanded and exclusive coverage, including in-depth looks at monster creation, video features, and more

Thick as Thieves

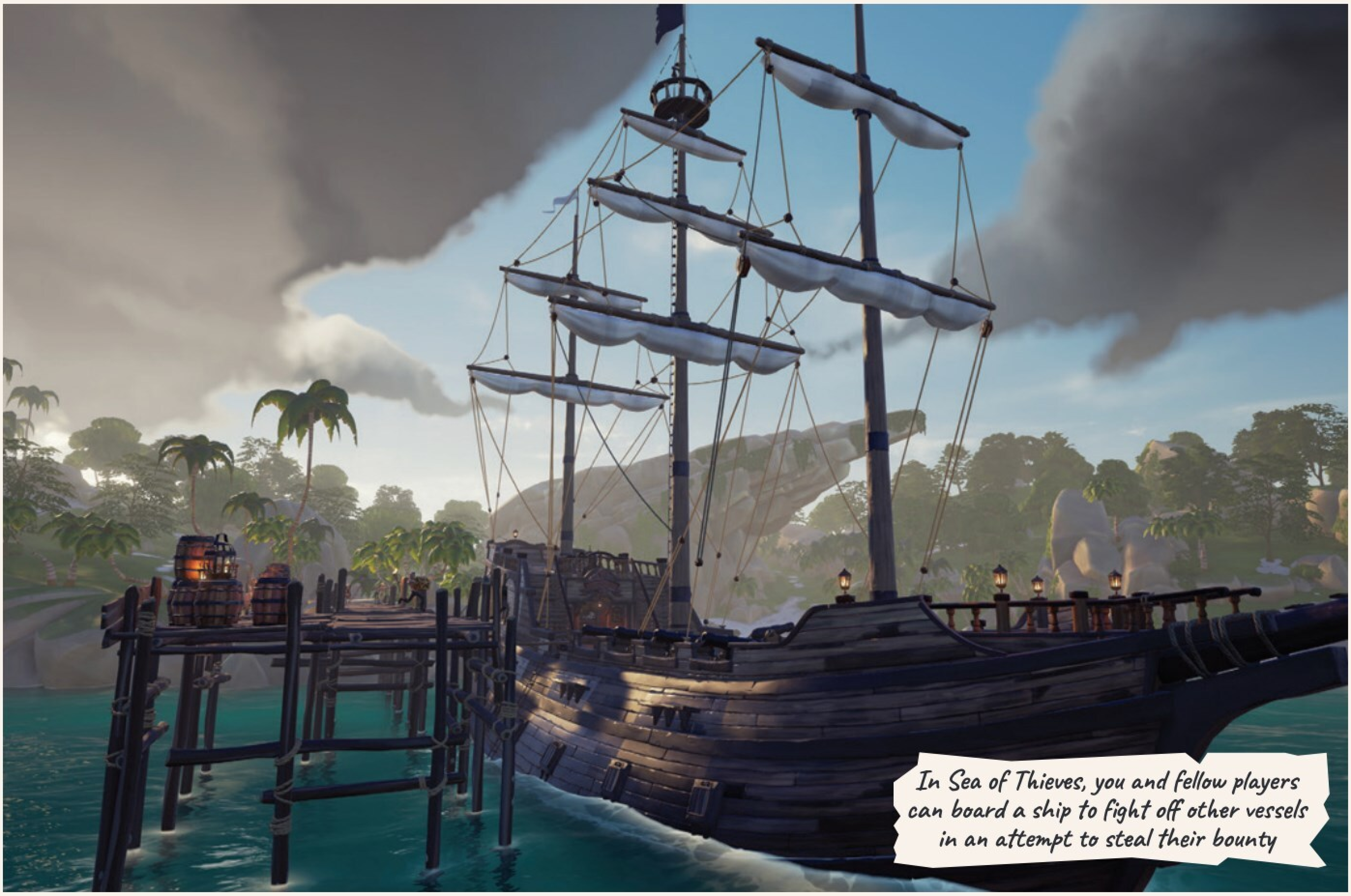
By Ben Reeves

How Rare upturned its developmental process to play pirates with Sea of Thieves

Rare was once a giant in the industry. The enigmatic U.K. studio built a legacy on innovative and often off beat classics like Donkey Kong Country, Banjo-Kazooie, and Perfect Dark. In the '90s, Rare's name was virtually synonymous with quality. But over time, that reputation faded. A series of lackluster releases like Grabbed by the Ghoulies, Perfect Dark Zero, and Kameo: Elements of Power took the shine off Rare's star. Today, the studio is best known for its work on the Kinect Sports series and constructing the Avatar characters that once represented Xbox Live users and have now become largely ignored.

Rare hopes to change this image with the release of Sea of Thieves – a shared-world action game where players team up to crew a pirate ship and role-play the life of a treasure hunter. In order to develop a game it hopes lives up to its past genius, the studio has invited a community of fans into the creative process.

» PLATFORM	» STYLE	» PUBLISHER	» DEVELOPER	» RELEASE
Xbox One • PC	Online Action	Microsoft Studios	Rare	2018



In Sea of Thieves, you and fellow players can board a ship to fight off other vessels in an attempt to steal their bounty

Setting A New Course

For most of Rare's 30-year history, the studio has been notoriously secretive. Tucked into the middle of the British countryside and surrounded by sheep farms, Rare's offices are so nondescript that cab drivers struggle to find the building. The company's 90-plus acres of rolling hills and trees seem like an idyllic place to make games, but those trees have also shielded Rare from eager fans looking to get a peek at the studio's next project.

For a long time, Rare's efforts were a mystery even to its own staff. The studio's offices are broken into four interconnected buildings, called barns, and developers who work in one barn haven't traditionally been allowed inside any of the company's other barns. This meant that the team that worked on GoldenEye 007 had no idea what the Banjo-Kazooie team was working on, and vice versa.

This air of mystery worked for several decades, but seemed almost paranoid in the modern era of social networking and global sharing. When Craig Duncan took over as studio head in 2010, one of his first priorities was tearing down those walls.

Over the years, Duncan has been trying to build his own legacy within the U.K. game industry. As the head of worldwide development for Codemasters, he helped develop games like Grid, Rise of the Argonauts, and Worms 4: Mayhem before heading up U.K. studios for both Sega and Midway.

"When I first started talking to Microsoft about a leadership role in the U.K., Rare quickly came up," Duncan says. "I grew up playing Rare games, and I had a view of what I thought Rare was, but I didn't know anyone that worked at Rare, which was strange because I knew everyone who worked in U.K. development…When I came in I was like, 'Okay, what have we got? What's Rare now? And what do we want Rare to be in the future?'"

Duncan remodeled Rare's offices, creating a more open layout that encouraged idea sharing. This new design was symbolic of Rare's new approach to game development under Duncan. The studio wanted to be more open with its fans and show the industry that it still had the steel to create a new IP that lived up to its legacy. As the rest of the studio developed Rare Replay, which was a celebration of Rare's past, Duncan put together a skunkworks team and tasked them with figuring out Rare's future.

"We looked at industry trends, at what was popular and tried to guess about where the industry was going," says executive producer Joe Neate. "We really liked shared world games like DayZ, Eve Online, and even Journey. Games that had a DNA that allowed for interesting, player-created stories. The scale of some of those stories was huge, with betrayals that took place over the course of 18 months. We wanted to make a game like that, where stories came out of the very fabric of players playing together."

The team began to dream about the kind of shared world Rare could build. They wanted to make a game that had a lower barrier to entry, one that would appeal to a wide audience but would also continue to foster a welcoming community as it grew. For a time, the team played with game ideas as far ranging as deep-space adventures, masquerading vampires, and lost dinosaur islands. Nothing felt right.

And then someone suggested pirates.

Sailing The Three Seas

In five months, a team of only five engineers and a couple designers built a prototype for their pirate game, which they dubbed Artemis. The game looked crude, but it featured all the major concepts that are still part of the game. Players join a party of around four and work together to pilot a ship to uncharted islands where they hunt for buried treasure and fight off other treasure hunters before bringing their spoils back to port.

Three years later, the game looks much better, but it feels surprisingly similar to that original concept. The ocean, however, has grown a great deal. Players can now traverse three distinct biomes. The first of these zones, called The Wilds, is an oppressive seascape of dark clouds and islands that feel like they're barely clinging to life. Players sail past ship graveyards where the dreams of pirates have crashed against the black sandstone. Beautiful blue skies and white sand await players that make their way to The Shores of Plenty, which is an idyllic pirate paradise. Those who crave a different kind of adventure can chart a course for the Ancient Islands, an Indiana Jones-inspired nirvana filled with temples, totem poles, and scattered signs of ancient civilization.

As players travel through these exotic locales, they complete quests and solve riddles to find buried treasures, battle skeleton warriors, and dive into the ocean to loot ancient shipwrecks. These adventures are all the more unpredictable thanks to the fact that every other ship on the water is crewed by other players. You'll never know who's out to steal your loot and who's eager to run from a fight.

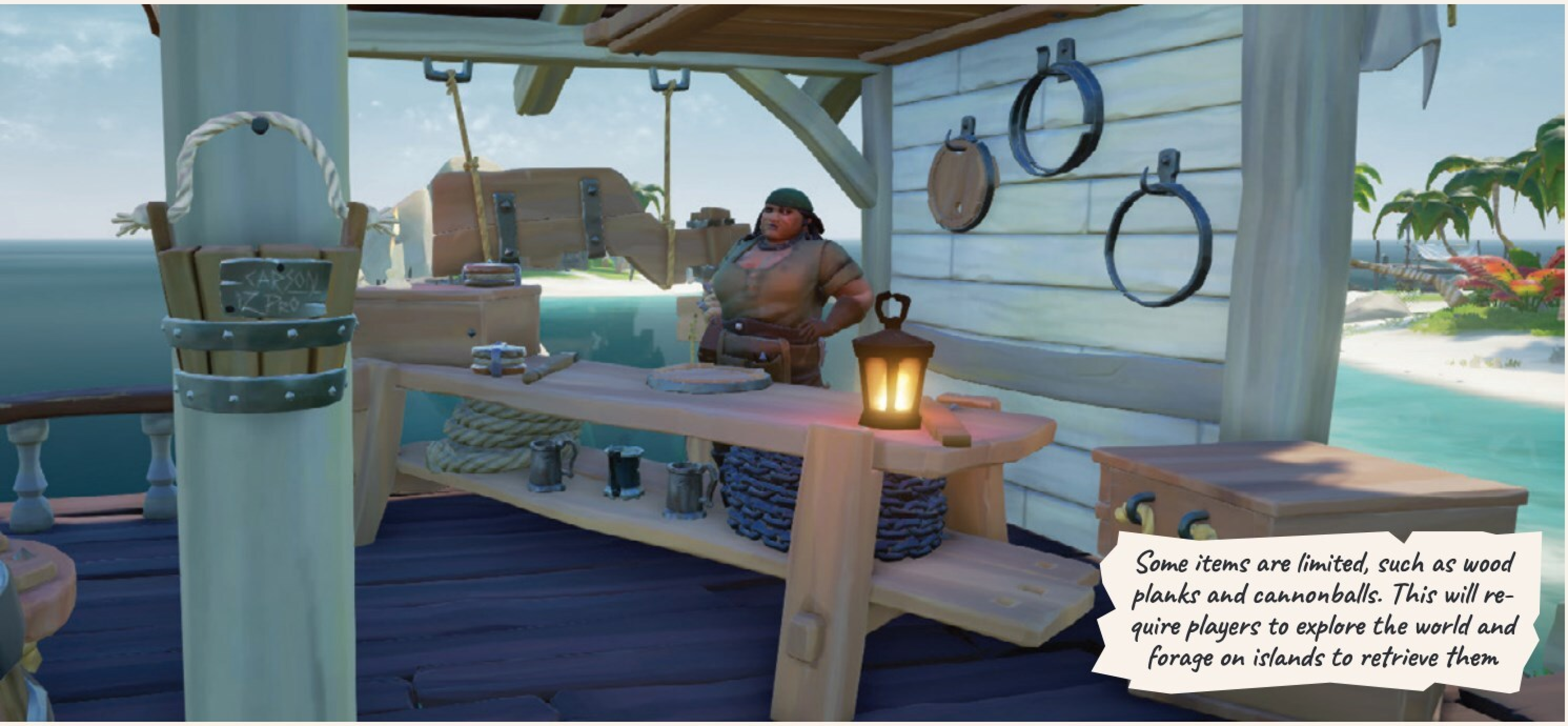
Rare says it isn't worried about crafting a larger narrative that ties these quests together, but the individual quests will eventually come packaged with their own tiny narratives. All this treasure hunting begs the question: What will players do with all this bounty? Unfortunately, Rare isn't ready to go into detail about its progression system until closer to launch.

"There are a lot of games out there that rely on the feeling of, 'How much did I increase my stats?'" says design director Mike Chapman. "'How many of my twos turned into threes and how many threes turn into fours?' In that world, if two people come across each other and one person sees that the other is 20 levels above them, they're always going to run away, because they have no chance. We want you to feel like you've always got a chance, so our progression system is not a single number. I don't see you and say, 'Oh, you're a six and I'm a five. You're better than me.' Instead, you've got unique cosmetics that are like trophies."

It's easy to imagine that players will be able to buy entire wardrobes of distinctive cosmetics and even replace limbs with Piratey prosthetics. Rare has already added several new weapons – such as a shrapnel-spewing blunderbuss – to Sea of Thieves' alpha. However, Rare also plans to give experienced players access to more exotic quest chains, which feature ever-greater rewards. Still, these rewards won't be limiting to other players, since newer crewmates can join in on these epic quests and reap the same rewards.

Players can also explore Sea of Thieves' world by themselves on a smaller ship if they want to, but one of the most interesting aspects of Rare's experience is how it has created an environment that encourages players to work together. Sea of Thieves features no classes or other specialization. Instead, Rare hopes players naturally fall into the roles they're best suited for. Crewing a massive galleon takes many hands, and a captain won't always be able to see where he's going from the navigation wheel, so he needs people in the crow's nest offering directions while other players turn the sails into the wind. In the chaos of combat, players might need to bounce between multiple roles. While one player mans the cannons, another might have to run below deck to repair leaks.

For the sake of fun, Rare isn't aiming for historical accuracy. Players can use pistols underwater to subdue bloodthirsty sharks, fire themselves out of cannons to reach shore, or enlist the help of mermaids to repair a broken ship. Rare often incorporates humor into its games, but Sea of Thieves' brand of whimsy is more interactive. Rather than doing stand-up, Rare is hosting improv comedy. This subtle shift shows Rare's desire to interact with its community. When the studio first began work on Sea of Thieves it had no idea how drastically that little shift would influence the game's development.



Some items are limited, such as wood planks and cannonballs. This will require players to explore the world and forage on islands to retrieve them

A Pirate's Life

Charting the course for Sea of Thieves, the studio figured it would be able to predict player retention based on how much players talked to each other while playing. The team guessed that those who talked with each other a lot would most likely have a good time and play the longest, those who didn't talk would probably play the least, and groups with a mix of both kinds of players would fall somewhere in the middle. When Rare invited players into its closed alpha in December of 2016, it tracked this kind of data and quickly learned that its predictions were wrong.

Groups that talked a lot did tend to return to the game regularly, but groups that didn't talk amongst themselves would also play for extended periods of time. In fact, they often discovered creative ways to communicate with one another, like shooting their guns at objects they wanted each other to notice. Players in mixed groups of talkers and non-talkers actually had the least fun. Rare now understands that players enjoy the game most when they spend time with like-minded players. This insight was crucial for the team, because it helped the studio understand how to better bring people together.

"Our game is a friendship creation tool," Neate says. "We want to turn as many strangers into friends as we can. A lot of the stuff on our roadmap allows players to make new friends, because that will lead to a healthier community. We intentionally have the social lubricants like the drinking and the music, because when you play music and you dance around or you have a drink and stumble all over the place, you kind of laugh and smile. When you do that with strangers, you're much more likely to make friends, just like you would in a real pub."

The data Rare collects from its alpha tests sharpens the game in other ways as well. For example, in Sea of Thieves' earliest conception, when players found a treasure chest, they got to open that chest immediately and one member in the group had to hold the treasure. Rare discovered that 90 percent of the time, crews devolved into mutiny as the players wrestled over who got to hold the treasure. This ran counter to Rare's desire to create a spirt of cooperation and foster friendships, so it changed the process, requiring crews to physically haul the treasure chests back to port before the spoils were evenly distributed amongst the whole crew.

As Rare continued thinking about how to encourage players to work together while transporting chests, the team came up with a series of unique chest types. The ultra-rare chests contain a lot of gold, but they also break the rules of the game in fun ways. For example, a chest called the Chest of a Thousand Grogs looks like a grog keg. When players pick up this keg they instantly become drunk, so their fellow crewmates must watch over them as they cart the chest back to the ship. Another chest, called the Chest of Sorrow, features the carved likeness of a face in agony. This chest constantly cries and will slowly fill the players' ship with water, forcing them to work together and continuously bail out their cargo hold as they make their way back to port.

"We found that it sort of bonds a crew together, because they just want to get the chest back and get the gold inside, but it uses the mechanics of bailing in a different way," Chapman says. "However, in the very third session after we put that chest into the game, people were already using it as a weapon. They would sneak onto other players' ships and hide the chest somewhere. Then the opposing team would suddenly be like, 'Why are we sinking? Where is all this water coming from?'"

You can sail the seas solo if you wish, or work together with a crew

DE TOX
DRINKING SPOT

To embrace the idea of community, Rare is putting emphasis on the players, whose usernames become inscribed on plaques and monuments in the world

X Marks The Spot

As a way of saying thank you to its fans, Rare is constantly looking for ways to incorporate Sea of Thieves' players into the game lore. One of the first ways the studio did this centers on death. When players die in-game they are transported to the Ferry of the Damned, where they wait to respawn back into the world. Players from all across the in-game world get transported onto the same ferry when they die, and Rare says that some players from opposing crews have become friends after meeting on the Ferry of the Damned. The first player who died in Sea of Thieves and journeyed to the Ferry of the Damned (which happened only four minutes after the servers were turned on) got his name carved into one corner of the ferry.

Other notorious players have had their likenesses carved onto wanted posters and had in-game pubs named after them to memorialize their deeds. At one point, Rare noticed that a player had fallen to his death several times more than any other player, so the studio made a memorial to him at the bottom of a nearby cliff. Rare eventually learned that this player was intentionally jumping to his death so that he could respawn with refilled health.

These little tributes do more than color the world; Rare considers these stories a part of the world's lore and references these unique locations in quest riddles, incorporating them into the treasure hunts that are the core loop of the game. This is something the studio expects to continue even after the game has launched.

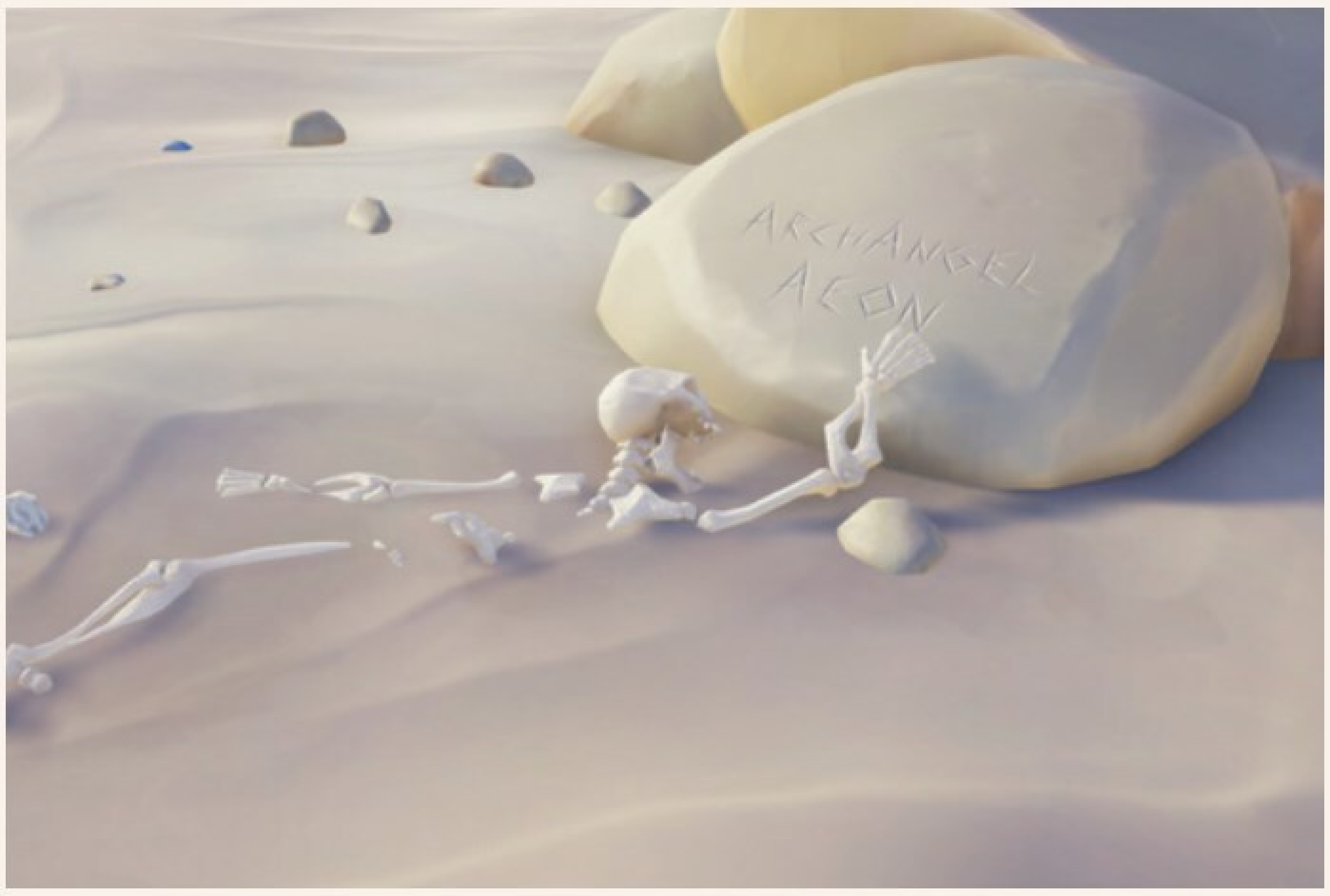
"I don't think you can make a shared-world game about player motivation without bringing players on the journey with you," Duncan says. "I don't think you get enough feedback. [Microsoft's executive vice president of gaming] Phil Spencer actually jokes that, 'You tell your fans more about this game than you tell us.'"

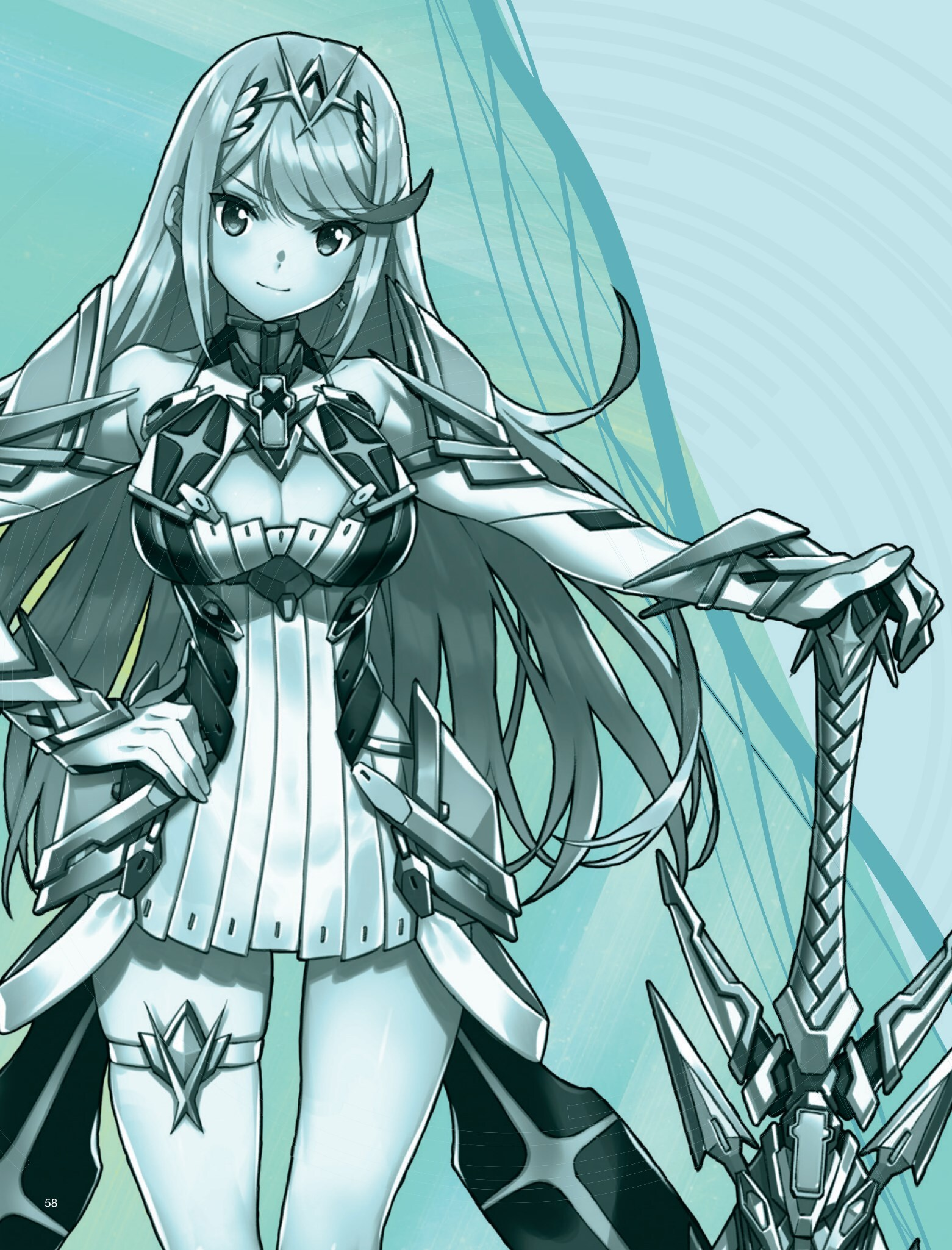
Rare cares more about how its fans feel about Sea of Thieves than what its corporate stakeholders think. For Rare, Sea of Thieves has been a journey to create a game that lives up to the studio's storied legacy. But it's also about something else: creating a game different than anything it has done before. It remains to be seen if Sea of Thieves' progression system has long-term hooks, but Rare has accomplished its goal of making something unique.

Sea of Thieves allows players to create their own adventures. It's a world where everyone is welcome, and where every member of the team is important and the team doesn't compete against itself. In that sense, it's fitting that Sea of Thieves is about pirates.

"Largely this is how pirates actually lived," Chapman says. "They voted on the effects of the crew. They decided which ships they were going to sack. They operated like a democracy. There were female pirates and pirates of every kind of creed and race from around the world. They were very forward-thinking because everyone was equal. Everyone was equal."

That's the real spirit of piracy that Sea of Thieves aspires to emulate. ◆





BIG WORLD, BIG BATTLES, BIG CHANGES

A deep dive into the highly anticipated sequel Xenoblade Chronicles 2

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

Since finishing up the Xenosaga trilogy, Monolith Soft has been reimagining the JRPG for modern gamers exclusively on Nintendo's consoles. The original Xenoblade Chronicles garnered plenty of fanfare and critical acclaim for its creative design and MMO-style combat. Its follow-up on Wii U, Xenoblade Chronicles X, didn't hit as high of a bar, but still showcased Monolith's knack for creating fun worlds. Now Monolith is going back to its roots with a more story-focused adventure that retains X's sense of discovery.

Xenoblade Chronicles 2 is one of the first big RPGs hitting Switch, a fast-selling platform still yearning for more exclusives. For a game so close to its launch date, Nintendo has been dishing out details slowly, leaving fans unsure of what to expect.

After spending four hours of hands-on time and chatting with its developers, we have a better understanding of what Xenoblade Chronicles 2 offers in terms of combat, characters, and exploration. Get ready to journey across colossal beasts and customize your party by discovering new Blades, all while seeking out the ultimate paradise for humanity.

» **PLATFORM** Switch » **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing » **PUBLISHER** Nintendo » **DEVELOPER** Monolith Software » **RELEASE** December 1

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PROTECTING A BLADE

While Xenoblade Chronicles 2 is technically the third game in the series, it's the one earning the rightful title of a sequel.

"Xenoblade Chronicles X was a game really focused on exploring and [having an] open world and [defeating] monsters," explains executive director Tetsuya Takahashi. "When we thought about starting to develop the next game, I wanted to go back to a more story-driven design. And so in that sense, this focus on a story-driven game is kind of the legacy of Xenoblade Chronicles 1, so we decided to kind of make it the next iteration of that."

Xenoblade Chronicles 2 fits within the series' universe, but the team didn't want to just rehash what it had already done. Therefore, it crafted a brand-new narrative and characters alongside a revamped combat system complete with the depth and customization the series is known for, connecting its story and combat with the concept of Blades. In this world, you have characters who are "Drivers" and those who are "Blades." Blades imbue Drivers with specific weapons, such as axes and swords, granting special abilities in combat. Every Blade has special attacks that center on an elemental affinity. This all ties into your battle strategy (more on that later).

The story revolves around a world of endless clouds named Alrest, a Driver named Rex, and a Blade named Pyra. At the start of the game, Rex is just an independent salvager, but when he crosses paths with Pyra, he feels compelled to help her, as Pyra is not your typical Blade. She's the Aegis, which means she's capable of absolute destructive power. This drives a mysterious group called Torna to try and manipulate her for their own selfish means. Tired of being sought after by so many vicious people, Pyra wants to escape and go back to her home, Elysium, which is also known as paradise for humanity. No one knows if this fabled land actually exists, but it's said to be the key to everyone's survival. "We [wanted] to make it into kind of a young man's adventure," Takahashi says. "It's kind of lighthearted – there's a lot of discoveries to be made, so we made it almost like an anime you would watch. But you know the kind of person that I am; the story does get a little bit heavier, a little bit darker. If you expect the same kind of evolution from the story that you would expect from a Xenoblade game, you're probably on the right track."

Your main goal in Xenoblade Chronicles 2 is to find Elysium, but it's not an easy task with everyone hunting you down while the world is embroiled in political turmoil. Many powers rule over different regions of Alrest, and each differ in how they coexist with their Titans. Having a deep respect for nature, the Kingdom of Uraya boasts advanced bio-technology, for example. In contrast is their rival, the Empire of Mor Adain. Controlling their Titans mechanically, the militaristic Empire packs heavy armaments for protection against potential threats.

Rex and Pyra meet other Drivers and their Blades as they navigate these regions. From the tech-savvy Tora, who creates his own robotic Blade named Poppi, to Nia, a hothead with a mysterious past and a regal Blade named Dromarch, every party member you encounter offers great (and much needed) assistance on your quest.

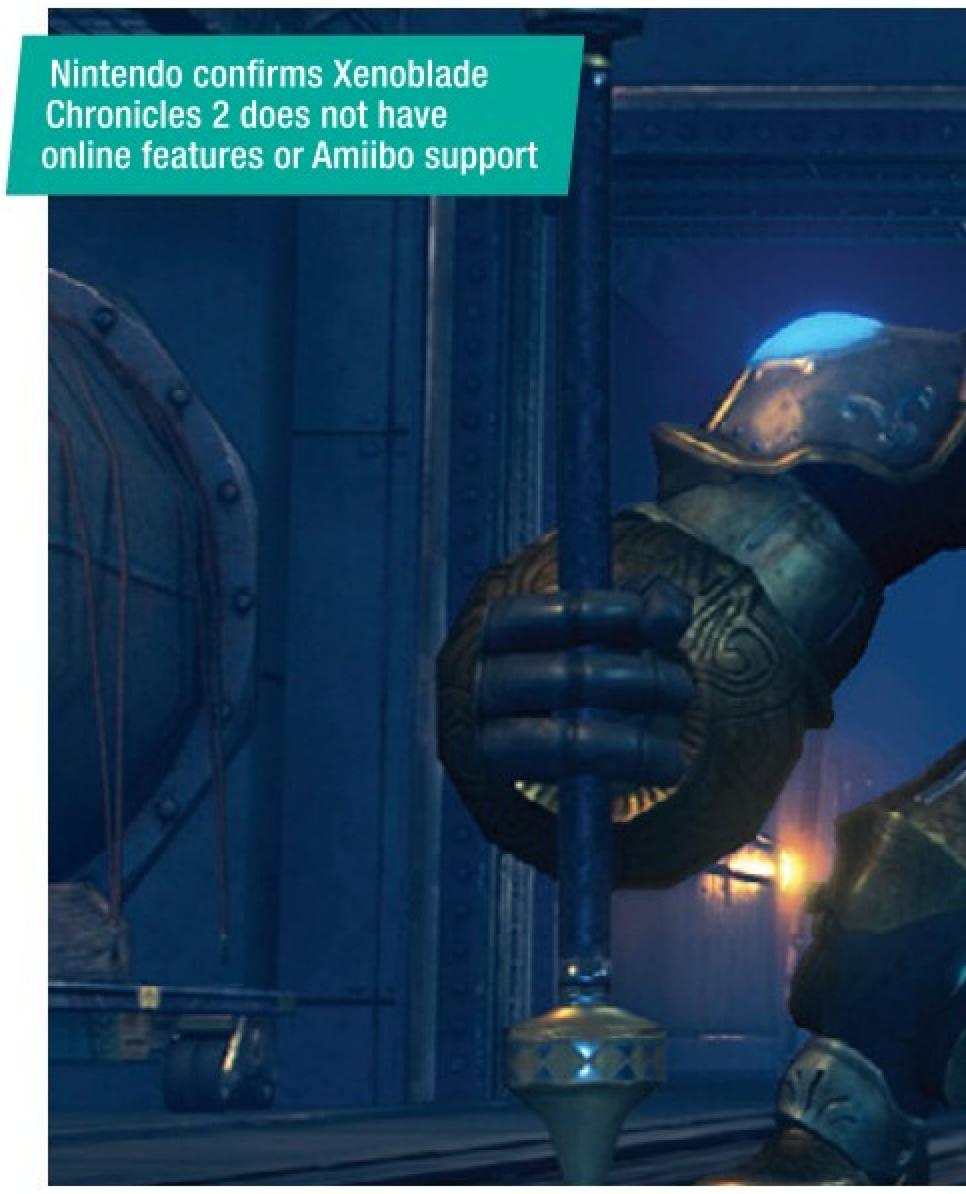
In many ways, Xenoblade Chronicles 2 focuses on what worked so well in the first game – providing a sense of purpose with the story. Unlike X, where you wandered around aimlessly for your next objective, Xenoblade Chronicles 2 gives you more direction and a direct connection to its characters and their plight.

This may technically be a sequel, but don't expect obvious nods to the first game. "It's completely different in terms of place, time, and space," Takahashi says. "Obviously I can't divulge all the details, but if you play the game, I think you'll get why this is called Xenoblade Chronicles 2."

This approach doesn't count out references to Takahashi's previous work on Xenogears or Xenosaga. "There's a lot that I can't talk about yet [that] hasn't been revealed, but it will be hopefully soon," Takahashi teases. "I think there's content in there where longtime fans of the series will have a pleasant surprise."

Deep Sky Diving

Get ready to dive into an ocean of clouds. In Xenoblade Chronicles 2, Rex has the ability to dive through the clouds and score big treasures. To do so, he must purchase a cylinder, which is a tank that allows you to dive. By hitting buttons at opportune moments as Rex runs to dive, you can increase the amount and chances of getting rare items. But beware, Rex can also bring enemies back with him that you must battle. This is a great way to get items and make money.


Nintendo confirms Xenoblade Chronicles 2 does not have online features or Amiibo support

A NEW WAY TO FIGHT

During my hands-on time, the biggest revelation is the complexity of the new battle system. You can have three Drivers in your party at once, and each has the ability to equip three different Blades they can swap to on the fly. Your Drivers are assigned roles based on the types of Blades you equip, such as healer, attack, or tank, similar to the first game. You receive bonuses depending on your class, which can boost damage and healing or provide other benefits.

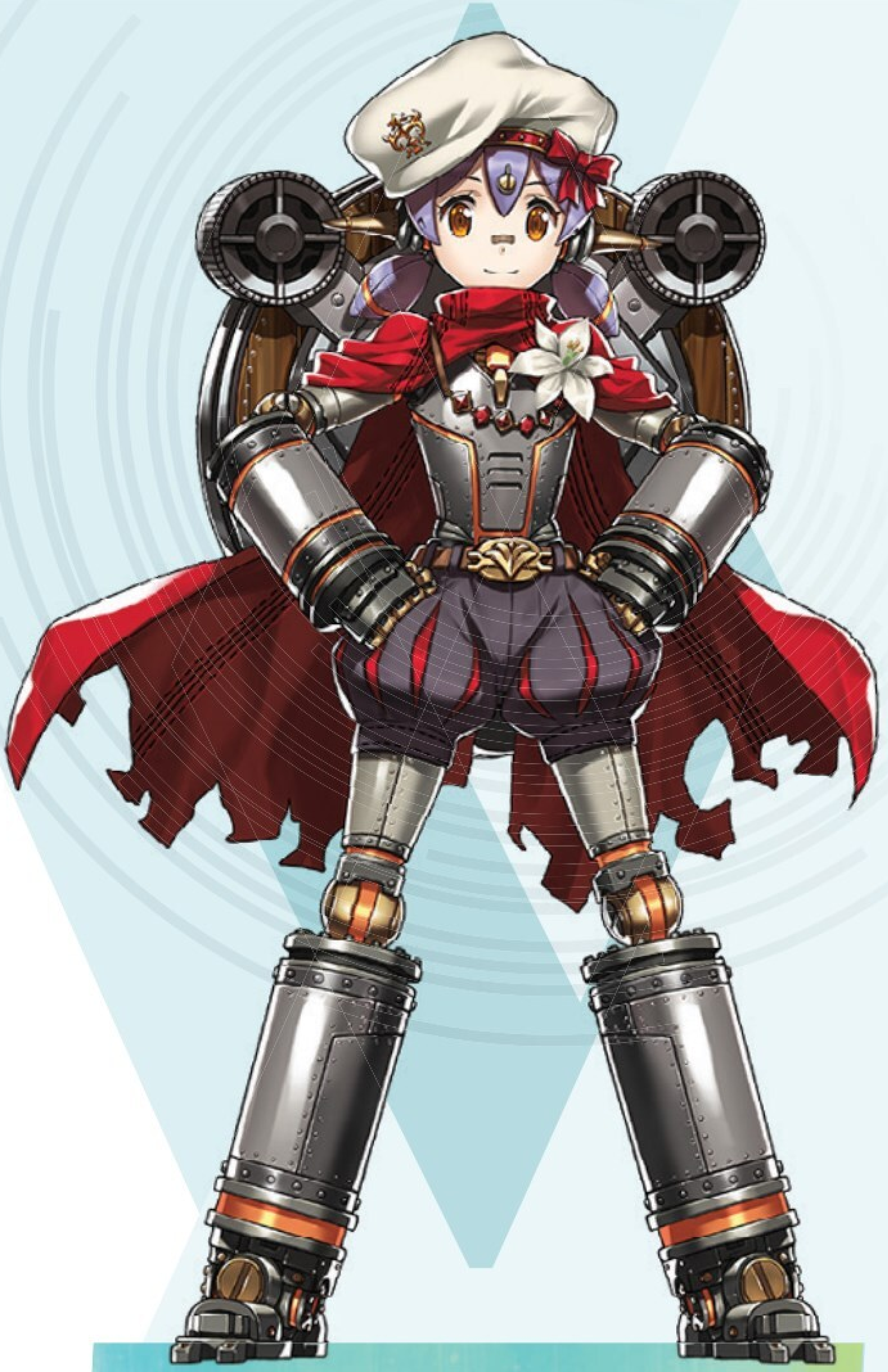
You only control one character on the battlefield, but aren't locked to Rex. Once you initiate battle, your character auto-attacks enemies in range using your active Blade's weapon. Auto-attacks build up a meter, and once filled, you can unleash the Blade's stronger abilities called Arts. Arts are not only powerful, but can also inflict status effects. Some Arts also factor in positioning, meaning if you strike the enemy from the side or back, you can increase the damage dealt. You can equip three arts at once per Blade, and these can be leveled up, allowing you to maximize your favorites.

As the master strategist, you decide what Blades and Arts to use, assuming they're not on cooldown. Although your Driver auto-attacks, battles still get frantic with button prompts to unleash devastating Art combos. You can cancel an incoming attack by using an Art right when your weapon finishes its combo. For instance, with Rex I anticipated the end of his three-move combo and then struck the Art immediately to block the incoming attack. Canceling quickly charges up your special meter, so it's in your best interest to perform it when you can.

The window of opportunity is slim on combos and canceling, so you must pay close attention to get the most out of combat. Pulling off combos can easily turn the tides of a tricky fight. Having trouble taking down an enemy? Not a problem. One character can inflict Break on the opponent, and another character can follow-up with Topple. This gives you a short time in which your enemy is defenseless, and you can then unleash your most powerful Arts. A combo like this should be familiar to returning players of the Xenoblade Chronicles games and shows that while there's the new introduction of the Blades mechanic, the combat is evolved from the previous entries.

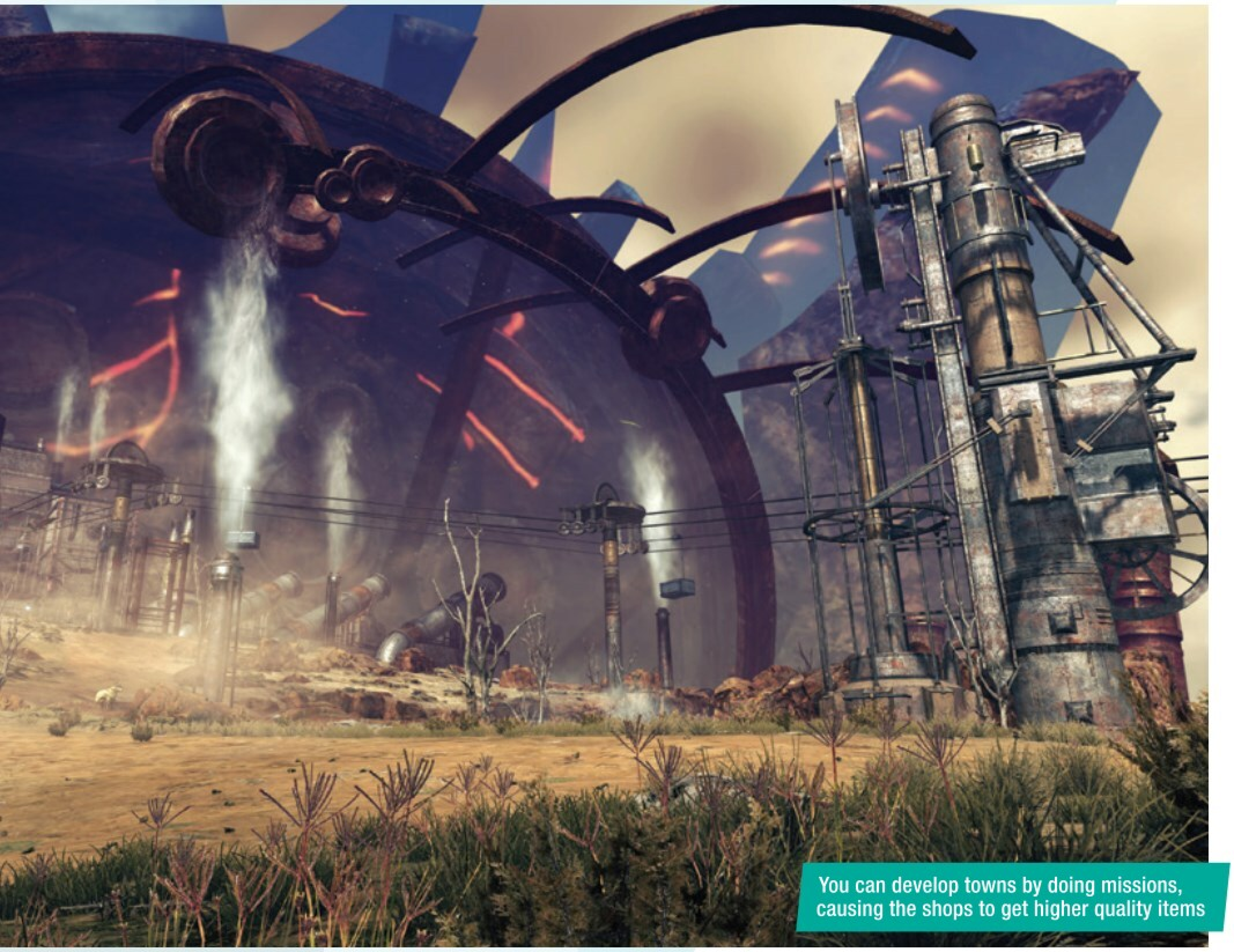
The depth doesn't stop there. You also have a multi-level special meter that fills up via your Arts. You can unleash up to four levels of specials, which also inflict an elemental status effect based on the element of the Blade. Then there are Blades combos – to perform these, you must inflict the elemental affinity specified on screen in order to get to the next level. Your party members help out with this. You might unlock level one with a wind attack, while to get to level two, you need to use an earth attack that your teammate has on hand, and so forth. These combos can result in extremely powerful attacks that have a variety of effects against your foes, such as preventing them from using their abilities and even their own Blades.

If Monolith learned anything from X, it's that people still enjoy finding those hard-to-take-down baddies that require you to pull out all stops. On top of Blade combos, you can go a step further with chain attacks, which are vital to taking down these larger bosses. To initiate a chain attack, you must fill your party meter by performing attacks and Arts. Once executed, each Driver takes a turn attacking the enemy with a powered-up level one special.



Upgrading Poppi

Poppi is an artificial Blade, so you can't improve her abilities the way you would other Blades. She still has an affinity chart and weapon modification, but you must create special core chips to maximize her output. You can purchase these chips by collecting gems that are only available by playing an arcade game called Tiger! Tiger! In it, you deep-sea dive and excavate jewels, trying to avoid enemies and obstacles. You have a limited amount of air and must grab as much treasure and bring it back up before you run out. Enemies can be taken out in different ways with your excavation tool, such as a turtle who needs to be hit from underneath to jellyfish needing to be hit on top of their head. "Off the bat, we wanted to have a different type of gameplay experience with Poppi, so we decided to put in a minigame," says executive director Tetsuya Takahashi. "The concept is kind of taken from '70s arcade games – that's the kind of vibe and atmosphere we wanted to create." Takahashi hinted that it's in your best interest to spend the time to level up Poppi.



You can develop towns by doing missions, causing the shops to get higher quality items

Elemental orbs also appear on the enemy from performing Blade combos, and you can burst them by attacking them with their opposite element. You have three chances to break one of these orbs and if you do, your three active Drivers get to take another shot with their powered-up special. Keep timing your attacks right, and your attack power keeps increasing, allowing you to do crazy damage. It gets extremely satisfying when it all comes together.

These layers to the battle system are a lot to take in, and I felt overwhelmed at first, but the game introduces you to everything gradually. Once you learn the ropes, it becomes second nature. It can be frustrating missing a cool combo because you don't have the right element or your timing is just a tad too late, but missing the higher combos won't hinder you during regular battles. I liked what I played of the battle system, because it feels like you're constantly getting new strategies and Arts by finding new Blades with different weapons and element types.

Monolith says it spent a lot of time thinking about how to revamp the control scheme, and it shows. The controls are also smooth and a lot more direct than past games, which were very menu-heavy. Everything revolves around simple button presses. Now you can use the Arts tied to your weapon simply by pressing the corresponding button on the right Joy-Con. The buttons on the left Joy-Con match up with your blades, allowing you to switch weapons in a jiffy to adapt to situations. “In terms of the UI, this game is on a new console, and so we wanted to make sure it matches that hardware,” Takahashi says. “We felt that the way we have it now, it makes it a lot more instinctual – it's very natural. And the Switch is also portable, and since you can take it anywhere you want, we made sure the UI is very easy to see, even when you're carrying it around with you.”

A WORLD OF EXPLORATION

Exploration has always been a huge part of the Xenoblade series, and that isn't changing. If anything, it's getting even more exciting with the addition of core crystals, which are used to unlock new Blades. Some you collect through the story, while others can be found by doing quests or taking down enemies. Core crystals come in three different tiers: common, rare, or legendary. Nintendo says Xenoblade Chronicles 2 has no microtransactions, so you won't be buying these crystals with real money. The game has some ways you can increase your chances of getting certain elements by buying boosters with in-game currency, but they don't come cheap. You also can't cheat because the game saves as soon as you open a core crystal, not allowing you to reload if you don't get what you want.

Opening core crystals became one of my favorite things to do. Not only are there some really cool designs and animations (one of my Blades came out bouncing a basketball), but getting a new Blade often brings new abilities and it feels like you hit the jackpot and unlocked massive power when you get something higher than common. “We spent a lot of time on the 3D animation involved in bringing them to life, and probably overall, the work we did on the Blades would be about equal to the time we spent crafting the main story of the game,” says producer Koh Kojima.

Kojima also likes the thrill of discovering what's under each Blade's hood. “When you get Blades, sometimes you might get [ones] that you initially don't want, but when you actually start using them, you're like, ‘oh, no, this is actually a really useful Blade.’ There's this kind of feeling of unexpectedness that happens,” he adds.

The customization options with your Blades also feel endless. They change your party dynamic, their weapon type changes your play style (from quick-striking knuckles to lumbering but powerful axes), and you can enhance them. For instance, every Blade has its own ring of achievements, which range from killing a certain number of enemies to giving your Blade its favorite food. Completing all those achievements earns you different special effects, such as upping your chances of blocking an attack by 70 percent or increasing aerial damage by 60 percent.

Defeating enemies produces aux cores, crafting materials that are used to upgrade your Blades. You use aux cores to create enhancements for your Blades to give them different perks, such as critical up and reflect damage. Blades can equip three of these enhancements at a time.

A New Art Style

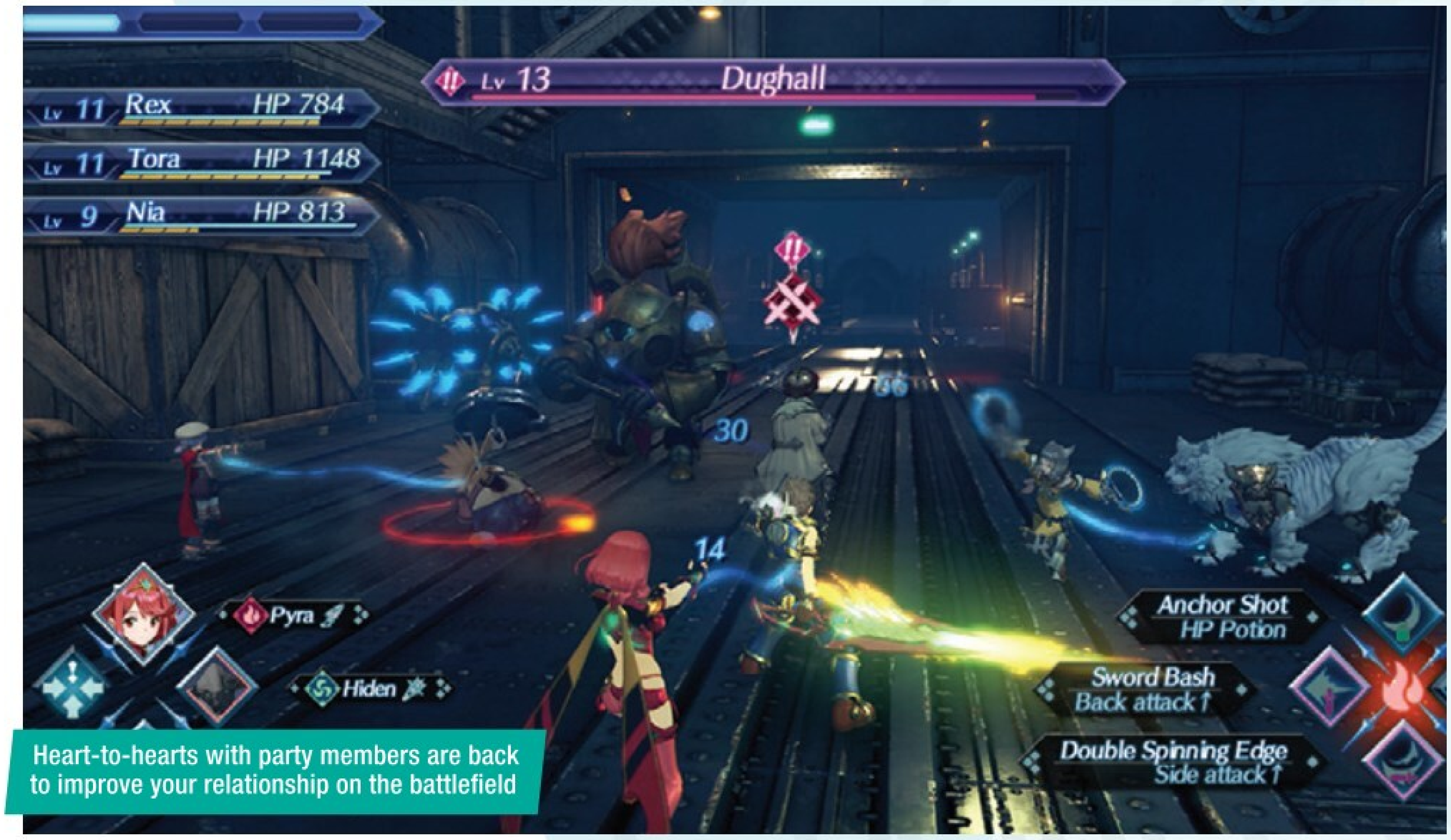
Xenoblade Chronicles 2 boasts a more youthful art style, looking closer to anime. It was a change Monolith felt would help make their characters come alive better. “We felt that in Xenoblade Chronicles 1 and X, the facial expressions [were] kind of a little bit hard, a little bit stiff,” says executive director Tetsuya Takahashi. “We really wanted to put a little bit more focus on creating facial expressions and for the characters to be more expressive, and so that's why we went with the direction we did, which I guess you could say is a little bit leaning toward something like Japanese animation.”

One feature that is sure to come in handy is merch missions. You can easily level up Blades when they're not in your party by sending them on these quests. This gives them experience points and also grants you new items. In addition, sending a Blade on a merch mission can also increase your chance to complete some of their achievements to unlock aforementioned special effects. The missions take about 30 in-game minutes, but if you have the suggested field skills, it makes it go faster. Another way to improve your Blade quickly without having to grind is by using core chips. Purchasing and finding these can multiply a character's attack damage.

Finding Blades is just one part of the exploration. Monolith dialed back from Xenoblade X in terms of surface area, but that doesn't mean there's not much to do. "Because this game is story-driven, I don't think that an open world is necessarily appropriate," Takahashi explains. "And I feel that we were able to make a game [with a world] that's really appropriate and really supports the story-driven aspect of this game. For example, if you compare it to Xenoblade 1, there's plenty of places [and worlds] to explore; but when you look at simple surface area, it might be a little bit smaller than Xenoblade Chronicles X. Like I mentioned, I don't think that such a vast space is necessary, so instead of focusing on increasing the raw surface area, we thought it was more important to increase the density and pack in as much variety in design [as possible], and for people to be able to enjoy the changing landscape as they traverse and explore this world."

This is no ordinary adventure; you run on the backs and sometimes even the insides of titans that look like giraffes, whales, and humanoids. Expect to also face all kinds of harsh weather, from frozen landscapes to sand storms affecting your visibility.

As the series is known for, Xenoblade 2 has its share of side quests. I saw tons of NPCs with quest markers and notice boards in every town. The basic fetch quests are still there, but the game also has its share that add to the story. You can even unlock some of the rare Blades and learn more about them through side quests. "They're more directly related to their story, and you get to learn about their quirky characteristics [and] their personality traits that they have," Takahashi says. "There's also a lot of subquests that kind of branch off of the main storyline in that there might be a character that only has a small role in the main story, but if you chase that down, you get to learn more about this character and more about who they are."



Heart-to-hearts with party members are back to improve your relationship on the battlefield

THE LONG ROAD AHEAD

Monolith is still dedicated to providing a lengthy RPG. Xenoblade Chronicles has only 10 chapters, and when I was brought into chapter four we were only around the 45-hour mark. "As you may or may not have expected, the playtime required to beat this game is a little on the high side," Takahashi says. "If you just play the mainline story, there's still enough to probably be comparable to Xenoblade 1, but like in past Xeno series, if you are just playing the main story, there might be times where you encounter a boss or an enemy that's actually a little bit too tough or very tough for you to beat. I strongly recommend taking side roads, taking the time to explore different areas, defeating monsters, picking up items, leveling your character up, [and] doing quests."

Time will tell if Xenoblade 2 can surpass its predecessors, but so far it looks promising, with Monolith taking the best elements from its last two entries and packing them into a more contained, story-driven experience. Hopefully, as a December release, it can make waves late in the year and give Switch owners a new big RPG to sink their teeth into.

As for the future, Monolith is already planning. "Moving forward, if we do another story-driven Xenoblade game, I was thinking I'd like to keep the numbering going," Takahashi says. "Now that we've gone through the process of development, we're in a spot now where I'm beginning to think about what we want to do next," Kojima adds. "We'll really be keeping our ears to the ground to see what fans are wanting, what they're looking forward to. We've enjoyed this collaboration with Nintendo so far. We really are thinking about where to go next, and that's where I'm at right now." ◆

Final Disaster
B

Destiny 2: Curse Of Osiris

Return to Mercury

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online Multiplayer Shooter

» Publisher
Activision

» Developer
Bungie

» Release
December 5

Destiny 2 has received some dramatic feedback in its first months of release, from an ecstatic community in the early weeks, to deep frustrations about long-term replayability from its more fervent players in the weeks that followed. Amid that ongoing conversation and critique, Bungie has remained steadfast in its commitment to regular events and activities from week to week, and that plan remains on track for the game's first expansion. Curse of Osiris adds a new destination, missions, and more, and players eager for more Destiny will have it in hand by December.

From the Trials PvP event of the first game, to cryptic clues in some of the adventures of Destiny 2's base game, players have had plenty of teases about a mysterious warlock named Osiris. The exiled warrior/scholar was once drawn to learn more about the enigmatic alien Vex, and his whereabouts have remained unknown. Curse of Osiris aims to solve that mystery, as players attempt to rescue Osiris from the Vex. "He's lost in this Vex simulation, in this machine that the Vex have built in the center of Mercury," says game director Dan Miller. "It's about you trying to find him."

That means that for the first time, Guardians explore Mercury as an in-game destination, not just landing there for a few Crucible matches. Mercury has been overridden by Vex technology, and shattered by the recent conflict with Ghaul and his Red Legion. "You've seen it before in PvP maps, and the Lighthouse for the best PvP players," says project lead Sam Jones. "We have a very small social area where Brother Vance is stationed, and then use that space as a hub to access all the activity content that we have to offer." Players can expect Mercury to offer the same breadth of experience available on other Destiny destinations, including story missions, lost sectors, adventures, public events, and more.

Brother Vance fills the role of a character like Devrim Kay in the EDZ on Earth – an on-site non-player character that helps guide your explorations. With a task selected, players move to activities through a unique mechanism. "We have this iconic device, this portal shaped like a triangle," Jones says. "It's a gateway through which you can access various activities around and about Mercury."

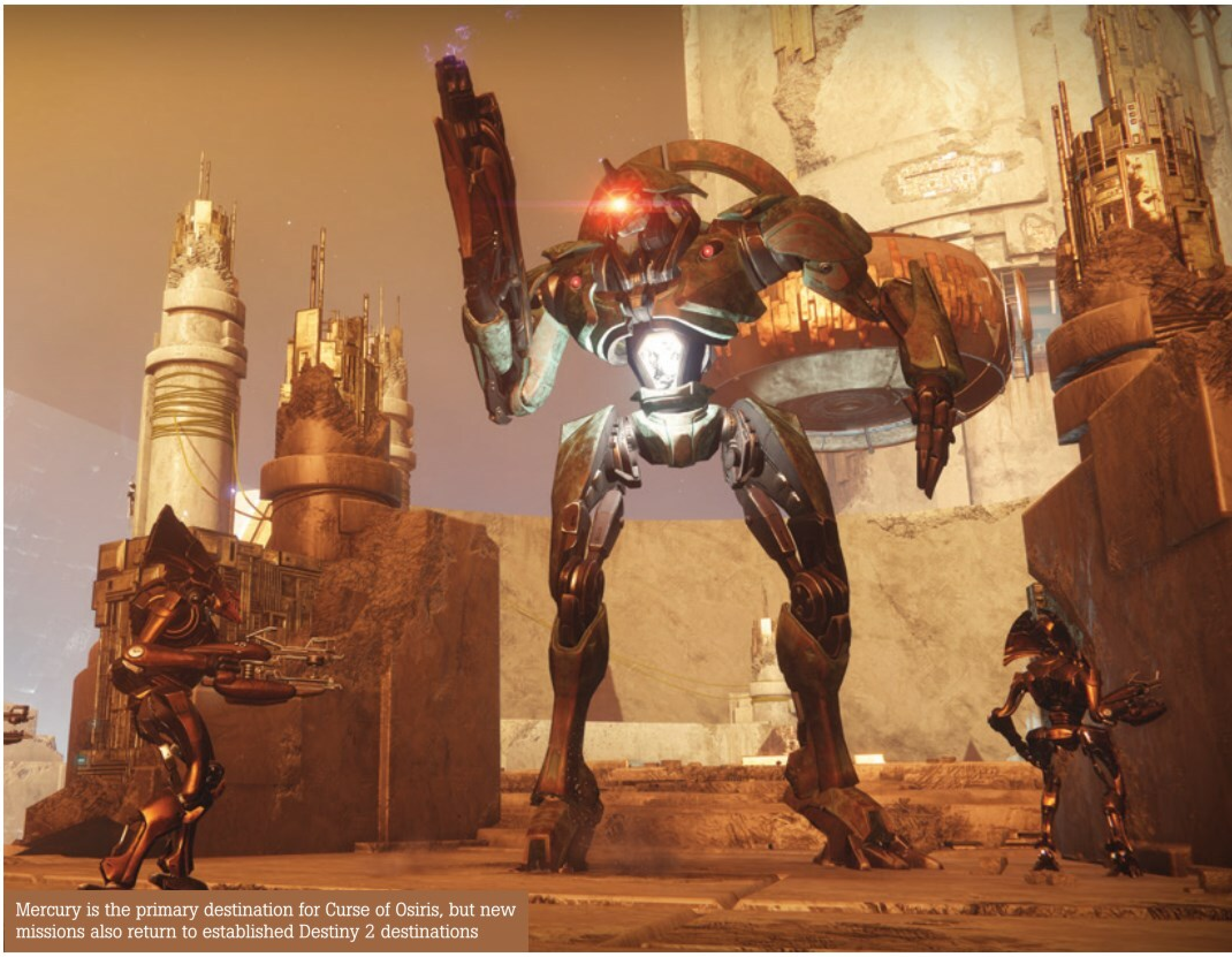
The Curse of Osiris storyline focuses on Mercury and its inscrutable Infinite Forest, but it won't be your only stop. "Your path through the story takes you to previous Destiny 2 destinations, so there's an ebb and flow to the experience," Miller says. "It gives you a nice change of pace and palette."

Moreover, Mercury may not be entirely what you expect; while aspects of the planet feature the monolithic block architecture of the Vex, players also visit the simulation itself. "It's the space where the Vex are forming their own plans, and simulating realities and other time periods to get an idea of how to take over everything," Miller says. Along the way, Miller implies that Guardians are likely to uncover some fascinating sights, but he also says that it's a space designed for Guardians on-foot; like the Dreadnaught in The Taken King, you won't be using a Sparrow.

With Osiris lost for much of the story, the bulk of the storytelling falls to other characters. His disciple, Brother Vance, serves as the boots on the ground on Mercury. Yet Ikora Rey is positioned as the most recognizable figure to drive the story forward. "Ikora was a student of Osiris," Miller says. "She's a major part of the expansion. We're doing a lot more focus on Ikora as a character, and that relationship with Osiris." Finally, we also meet a brand-new character – Sagira – who represents something many fans have been clamoring for. "She is Osiris' Ghost," Miller says. "It's the first time we've heard any other Ghost besides your own, and we have this awesome moment where you realize that each of the Ghosts have their own voices."

Beyond a continued fleshing out of

PS4 is set to receive an exclusive Crucible map this time around


Mercury is the primary destination for Curse of Osiris, but new missions also return to established Destiny 2 destinations

the Destiny 2 yarn, Curse of Osiris also provides new chances to progress. The expansion sees both a level increase to 25, as well as a power increase that stretches beyond the previous cap of 305 and up to 335. New exotic items are also promised, but their details are a closely guarded secret. Existing equipment from the base game can also be powered up and advanced into the new tier of play.

The strike playlist is growing, but we have no confirmation yet about how many new strikes are expected to arrive. PvP faithful can expect a collection of new maps to enter circulation. Will there a new raid? "There is raid content in Curse of Osiris, but it's a new activity type," Miller says. "We'll tell you more about it soon."

Curse of Osiris also coincides with the next phase of the broader Destiny 2 season for clans and other events. "With Curse of Osiris, we are starting the next season for Destiny 2," says live game director Christopher Barrett. "Since this is the beginning of the stories we'll be unfolding for the sequel, it's important to us to connect the expansions to the narrative for Destiny 2 so the players can understand how their triumphs impact the universe." Questions remain about how effectual these seasons can be in players' investment within the universe, but Curse of Osiris should offer a clear sense of Bungie's vision for seasons moving forward.

Within the Destiny 2 community, important aspects of gameplay have seen a lot of discussion and criticism, including the nature of inventory management and vault space, the viability of the token-based investment game, and issues of balance between weapon types and Guardian subclasses. Even as Bungie considers how to address those concerns, Curse of Osiris promises a story and character that fans have been eager to confront, and a chance for the developer to continue to tweak the balance between streamlined accessibility and long-term depth. » **Matt Miller**

Red Dead Redemption II

New trailer confirms prequel setting

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Rockstar Games

» **Developer**
Rockstar Games

» **Release**
Spring

Coming off the original Red Dead Redemption II trailer last year, we had a sneaking suspicion that at least part of the game was set before the events of the first game. Early city street lighting, larger herds of buffalo (they were nearly extinct during John Marston's adventures), and *There Will Be Blood*-style oil fields all pointed to the game taking place during the turn of the century. When Rockstar released the second trailer last month, it confirmed our working theory.

Charismatic and ruthless gang leader Dutch van der Linde returns alive and well doing his best Cy Tolliver impersonation. The last time we saw Dutch in Red Dead Redmemption, he hurled himself off the cliff of his mountain base, and agent Edgar Ross put a bullet in the head of his corpse for good measure. Deceased gang member Bill Williamson also featured prominently in the trailer, indicating that RDR II could take place during the Van der Linde gang's bloody crime spree when they robbed more than 40 banks across the frontier. During the brief trailer, the gang stops a train dead in its tracks and robs a bank, hinting RDR II may support sophisticated heists like GTA V.

The trailer also introduced us to a new outlaw named Arthur Morgan. We first see this gruff Van der Linde associate track down a cowboy on the range who apparently owes some money. Judging by our first impression, Morgan seems more menacing than John Marston ever was, issuing threats to the first two people we see him interact with in the trailer. One of the dialogue snippets makes it clear he's a wanted man, and later in the trailer he mentions the gang has lawmen after them in three different states. It still remains unclear whether Morgan is the lone playable character or if RDR II has plans for multiple protagonists as in Grand Theft Auto V. Later in the trailer, we see a knife-wielding female who appears to be on an errand of urgency as well. Her role remains a mystery.

During the original reveal, Rockstar said the game is "an epic tale of life in America's unforgiving heartland." To this point we've seen lush farmland, rolling prairies, bustling towns, and dense forests. The new trailer revealed two other compelling locations as well: a snowy mountain pass and a bayou region that looks modeled after Louisiana. The swamps introduce another dangerous animal to be wary of during your explorations: alligators. These wetland predators weren't the only fearsome animals in the trailer; we also saw a ferocious bear with gnarled teeth charging through a stream. Hunters who longed for a bow and arrow in the original game will be happy to hear that they are coming to the sequel.

We still have more questions than answers about Red Dead Redemption II. Does the game hop between different periods of time? If not and it's a straight prequel, why give it the title of a sequel? Will the game ship with an online component out of the gate or will it lead with the story-driven campaign like Grand Theft Auto V did? We'll have to wait for these answers and more, but even as we remain in the dark on these issues Red Dead Redemption II still sits comfortably atop our list of most anticipated games. » **Matt Bertz**

Star Wars: Battlefront II

In service of the Empire

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter (40-Player Online)

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
EA Motive, DICE, Criterion

» Release
November 17

The rollercoaster ride of Star Wars fandom is familiar to those who have been on the planet long enough to see the series bounce wildly in quality. The video games that bear the same name have suffered the same up-and-down fate. While 2015's Battlefront attempted to change the fortunes with high production values and large-scale multiplayer battles, it might be Battlefront II that satisfies fans looking for a definitive single-player experience in the Star Wars universe.

The story centers on Iden Versio, the commander of the Empire's Inferno Squad, a black ops team with a singular goal of eradicating the Rebel Alliance. Iden begins the game having been captured by Rebel forces, only to escape and erase any inkling of a counter-offensive on Endor from her captors' systems. She uses a droid that detaches from her back to hack doors and shock enemies, but the assault rifle she grabs on her way out is a much more direct way to deal with threats. Of course, she can shoot the panels next to doors to lock confused rebel officers in the hallway while she continues forward with impunity.

The campaign picks up in the immediate aftermath of *Return of the Jedi*, focusing on Iden's journey to pick up the pieces of her life after the Emperor's death. From wiping out the remaining Rebel forces on the forest moon to rescuing her Imperial Admiral father, Iden's determined but somewhat ambling journey has a hint of loss to it. She begins to think about what the Empire means to her, especially when given a mission she does not completely understand, letting the game explore what is traditionally thought of as the side of unqualified evil.

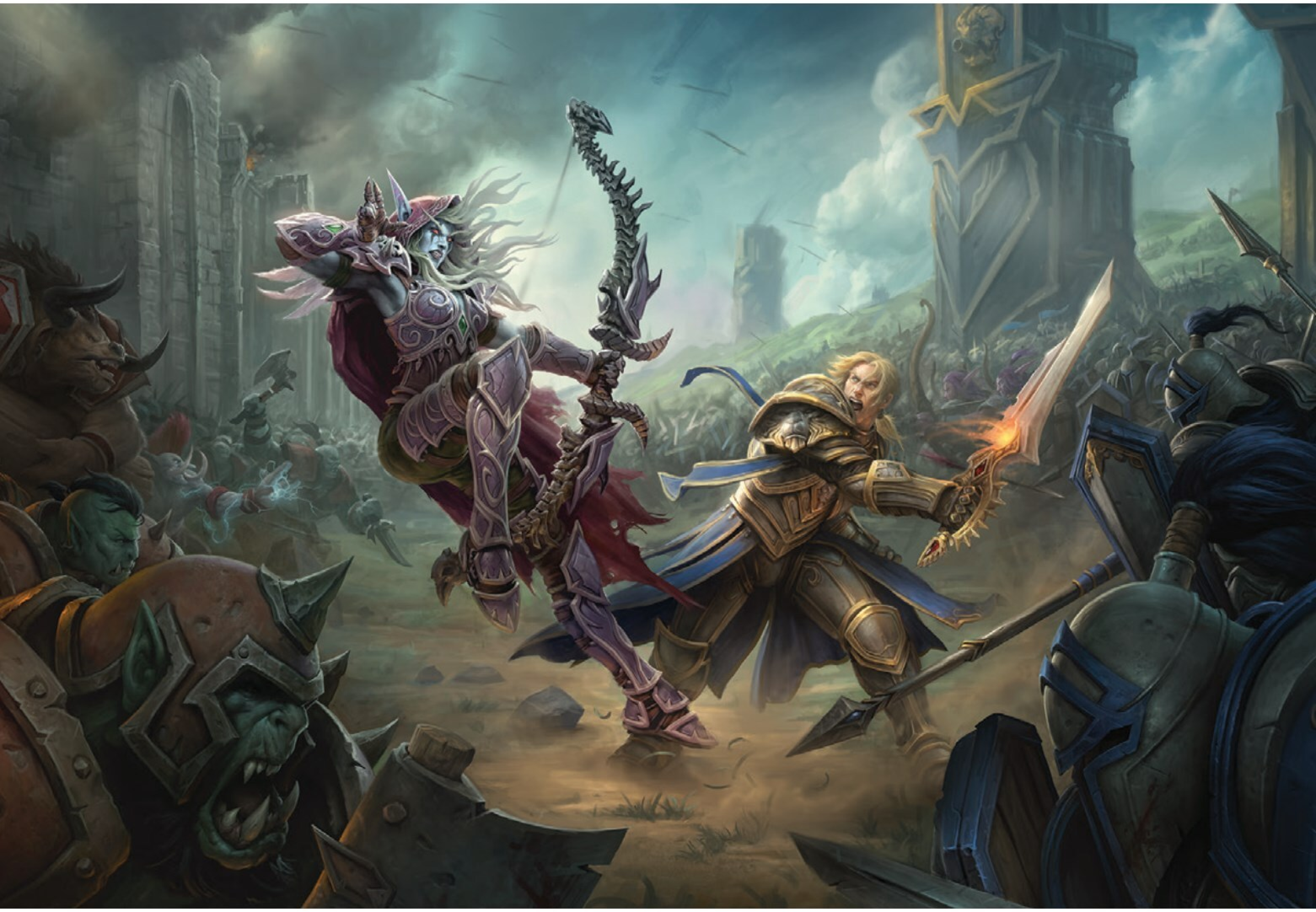
"There's a natural inclination to look at Stormtroopers and go, 'that's a villain' or to look at Rebels and go, 'that's a hero,'" says Walt Williams, co-writer of Battlefront II. "We have 40 years of training to think this way. Telling a story from the Imperial side, it was important that we grab that human aspect of it, of failure, of what people think the Empire can do for the galaxy."

The campaign's production value is unprecedented among single-player Star Wars experiences, blurring the line between the games and the movies in terms of visual excellence. From the burning fires of an embattled Endor to a high-speed mission destroying the internals of a Rebel frigate and escaping in your TIE Fighter, Battlefront II's single-player looks breathtakingly gorgeous at every turn.

EA Motive, the Montreal studio headed by former Assassin's Creed producer Jade Raymond, is developing the single-player campaign, and seems to understand what Star Wars fans want. Battlefront II does not exist in a vacuum, however, and it comes after first-person shooters like Titanfall 2 and Doom raised the bar for single-player campaigns. The first few levels of Battlefront II did not hit the highs I had hoped for from an FPS in 2017, but hopefully the campaign escalates appropriately and does the Star Wars name justice. » **Imran Khan**

World Of Warcraft: Battle For Azeroth

Alliance and Horde brawl once again



» **Platform**
PC • Mac

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

With all the artifact-finding and demon-destroying, the Alliance and Horde united against a common foe in Legion – but that's all about to change. Sparks set off a chain of events that bring the classic conflict back to the forefront of World of Warcraft in its seventh expansion, Battle For Azeroth. With the Burning Legion out of the picture, old rivalries have reignited, and the orcs vs. humans clash that started the Warcraft series is back in the spotlight.

Two big-name locations in Warcraft lore are at the forefront of this expansion. The Horde seeks their fortunes for the war in Zandalar (we always want more trolls, right?!), while the Alliance heads to Kul Tiras, home of Jaina Proudmoore, to seek aid.

While players won't have any new classes to pick from, there are exciting new allied races to play as, each with unique abilities – Highmountain Tauren, Dark Iron Dwarves, Void Elves, and more. Ever since beating the ore out of hundreds upon hundreds of Dark Iron Dwarves in Blackrock Mountain, I've wanted to play as one. Now I can.

Some of the action occurs on the Great Sea, as you work in small groups of three to capture valuable resources on islands. These islands feature changing enemies, environments, and objectives to keep things fresh as you continue your path of plunder on the high seas. Islands take place against NPC intruders or a group of enemy players that compete with your team to finish first. These randomized encounters keep small-party content interesting as you explore the expansion and work alongside traditional activities like world quests, dungeons, and raids.

A material called Azerite is available to customize your armor and traits. The legendary neckpiece Heart of Azeroth is given to each player by Magni Bronzebeard and can be imbued with this resource for powerful bonuses and progression.

Heroes advance through yet another 10 levels, raising the level cap to 120. Along the way, players explore locations like the Underrot, a lost titan vault, the Drust Realm of the Dead, and more. Players can start right at level 110 with the expansion, so there's no need to grind through years and years of content.

A new 20-player co-op PvE mode inspired by the Warcraft RTS games, Warfronts, challenges players to work together to gather resources, claim key strategic locations, and topple enemy commanders.

I'm eager to get right back into the classic conflict that Warcraft is built on when the Battle for Azeroth expansion hits. Lok'tar ogar! » **Daniel Tack**

Hearthstone: Kobolds And Catacombs

Dungeon crawling chaos

» Platform
PC • Mac
iOS • Android

» Style
1-Player Strategy
(2-Player online)

» Publisher
Blizzard Entertainment

» Developer
Blizzard Entertainment

» Release
December

Blizzard's next 135-card Hearthstone expansion doesn't just add new mechanics to the game, but gives players a whole new way to interact with the card-slinging. Kobolds and Catacombs is Blizzard's love letter to the dungeon crawling experience.

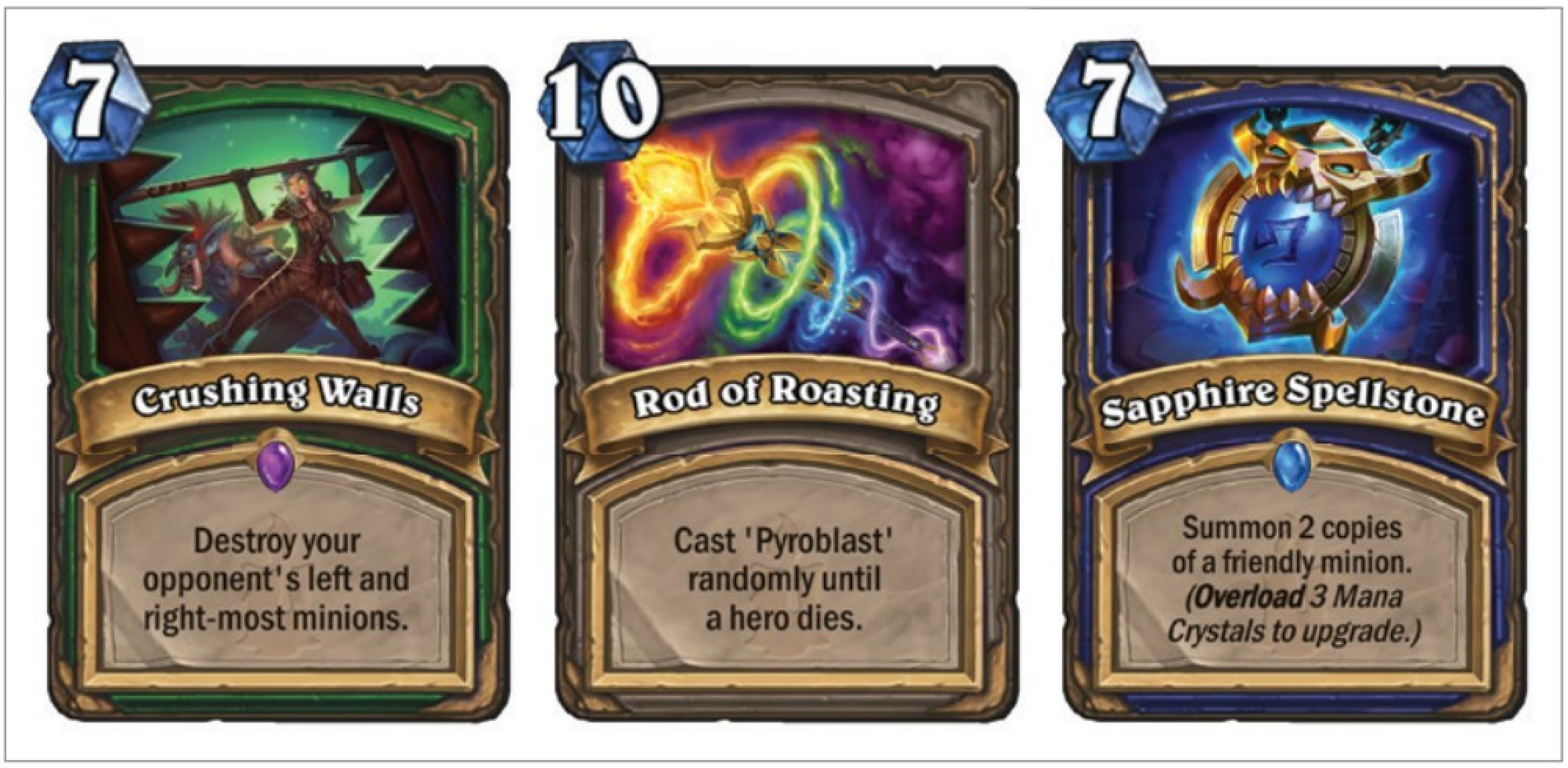
The familiar loop of finding loot, taking on bosses, traps, and growing stronger with each treasure cache serves as the cornerstone of the new single-player adventure content rolling out with the Kobolds and Catacombs expansion. In all, players have 48 unique levels of dungeons to explore.

Players begin the free adventure content with 10 cards and 15 health, and gain new cards and options after taking on epic bosses and encounters. One loss and you're out and back to trying again, so seeing how far you can make it and what loot you can find is part of the fun. You have access to cards that are far too powerful for competitive play in this mode; items like the Gloves of Mugging, which let you steal three cards from the opponent's hand, or the Rod of Roasting, which casts Pyroblast on random targets until a hero dies.

Outside of the single-player content, Kobolds and Catacombs introduces new features and mechanics to the base game that focus on the dungeon crawling theme. Each class gains access to a potent legendary weapon, unidentified magic items (that have a base effect and a random modifier when they enter your hand) and spellstones that charge up as they sit in your hand. For example, a Druid spellstone might do two damage, but grow in power each time you gain armor while it resides in your hand. The new "Recruit" keyword can be used to rip minions out of your deck directly into play, and should create interesting deck building choices. Will you put just a few specific minions in your deck to ensure you hit your critical targets or tailor your deck around recruiting minions of a certain cost?

Continuing with the dungeon theme, expect removal spells like traps to have a significant presence. Cards like the Hunter's Crushing Walls that smash the opponent's leftmost and rightmost minion are packed with flavor and functionality. A new Warlock legendary minion shows off the "boss" aspect of the dungeon experience, a character that gives you the first seal when it dies. After casting several seals in sequence (each leads to a bigger one), you can summon the biggest boss of them all, a demonic entity that destroys your opponent's entire deck when it enters the game. That's an epic way to win, and one your opponent can see coming the whole time – but can they stop it?

Dungeon running is always a fun gaming road to go down, and I'm excited to experience Hearthstone's loot, traps, and bosses in December. **» Daniel Tack**


7
Crushing Walls
Destroy your opponent's left and right-most minions.
10
Rod of Roasting
Cast 'Pyroblast' randomly until a hero dies.
7
Sapphire Spellstone
Summon 2 copies of a friendly minion. (Overload 3 Mana Crystals to upgrade.)

UFC 3

Retooling with an eye toward greatness

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One

» Style
1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)

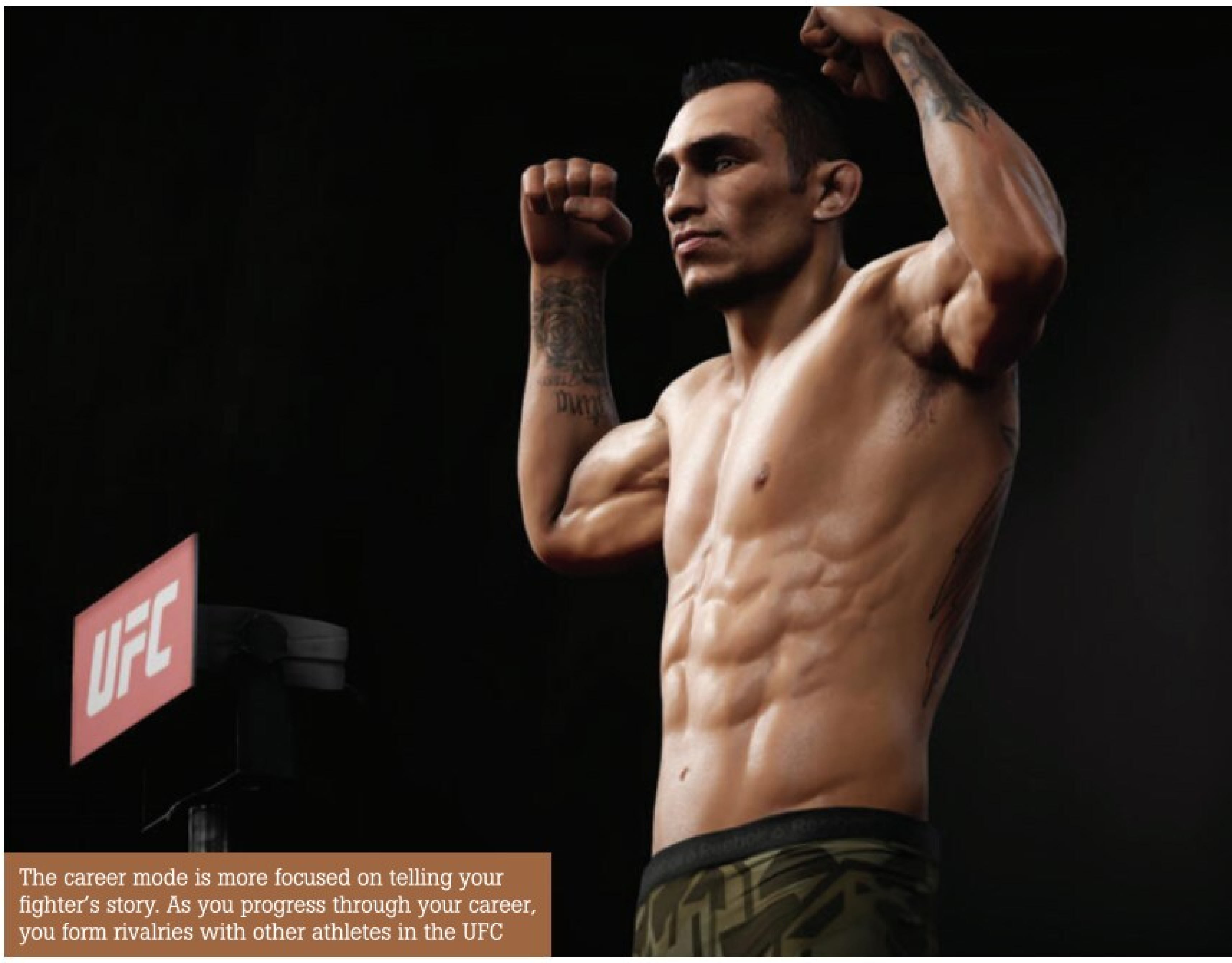
» Publisher
EA Sports

» Developer
EA Vancouver

» Release
February 2

When you're the undisputed champion, the hardest part is staying hungry for the next fight. As the developer of the only UFC game in town, EA Vancouver isn't comfortable resting on its laurels. Instead, UFC 3 revamps its most popular mode and reconfigures gameplay to create a better and more complete experience.

EA says that UFC 2's career was its most played mode, but it left many players unsatisfied. Because of this, career receives an overhaul to make it more about your fighter's journey to become the greatest of all time. Achieving GOAT status isn't simply about performing well, however; you also need to drum up hype for your fights in an interesting balancing act during training camp. Do you spend your time in training sessions, or do you try to gain more fans by streaming video games? How you perform in and out of the Octagon influences your next contract, which can earn you enough money to train at better gyms. You also develop rivalries with other UFC fighters, with whom you'll go back and forth on social media.


The career mode is more focused on telling your fighter's story. As you progress through your career, you form rivalries with other athletes in the UFC

While in the Octagon, the introduction of Real Player Motion technology enhances fighter movement by pulling together more than 5,000 new animations captured from real fighters rather than piecing together animations through an algorithm. The result is smoother transitions and more realism and fluidity in fighter movement. In addition, fighters have their personalities accentuated through new true-to-life walk-in, introduction, and victory animations. When you add better fighter likenesses (including cleaned up versions of fighters for cinematics and tale of the tapes) and new announcer Jon Anik, the presentation of UFC 3 progresses well beyond that of its predecessor.

The action in the Octagon receives an overhaul this year, as movement and striking see welcome changes

All the prettying up in the world is for naught if the gameplay changes detract from the experience. Thankfully, the changes improve the stand-up game while not straying from the established scheme. In UFC 2, you used the left stick to not only move, but also modify strikes in certain ways. Now, the left stick only controls motion, while the modifiers are relegated to the bumpers and triggers, resulting in more intuitive exchanges. In addition, new vulnerability frames encourage counter-striking since you do more damage if you hit them during certain points while they're throwing their attack. You can also feint attacks by pressing the block button when throwing a strike. The ground game hasn't received as many changes, but new cage positions and reversals evolve this all-important aspect of MMA.

For Ultimate Team players, the new iteration allows you to not only upgrade your original fighters, but licensed fighters as well. The streamlined customization system makes new items more impactful, and it's now easier to manage your fighters.

UFC 2 was a big improvement, and its successor is shaping up nicely. The game looks great in action, and within my first match, I was trading blows like a champ using the new striking controls. If the new career mode lives up to its potential, UFC 3 looks to continue building on the solid foundation of EA Sports' MMA franchise.
» Brian Shea

Far Cry 5

Taking down a doomsday cult

The Far Cry series has long transported us to exotic locales, from the stunning Himalayas to the tropical Rook Islands. This time, however, Ubisoft centers the series somewhere much closer to home.

Set in the fictional Hope County, Montana, Far Cry 5 represents a drastic change from its predecessors' international locations. Despite the American setting, this new installment still aims to explore something foreign to many of us by pitting the player against a militant doomsday cult where tensions have led to violent conflict.

Playing as a police deputy, you arrive by chopper in Hope County with an arrest warrant for the cult leader, Joseph Seed. The cult, Project at Eden's Gate, firmly believes that the end of days is upon us, and is armed to the teeth with formidable weapons.

Unfortunately for them, you also have an array of weapons at your disposal, giving you many methods to creatively bring death and destruction to your enemies. Your firearms can now be modified at a deeper level, such as changing the ammo type and fire rate to better correspond to your play style. You can choose from your traditional range of shotguns, sniper rifles, pistols, and machine guns, but Far Cry 5 also introduces dynamite, slingshots, and a compound bow perfect for hunting. Melee weapons include a baseball bat, pipe, shovel, and more.

"All the variety of the melee weapons adds a new layer of strategy," says associate producer Phil Fournier. "Your melee weapons are good for stealth, but you can throw them and they're also consumable. You need to manage those resources smartly."

Vehicles have been a staple in the series, and this time around, Ubisoft plans to make them customizable. "For this game, we really treated vehicles as weapons," Fournier says. "You'll be able to customize your vehicles to either add attachments or change the paint job." You can attach turrets to your vehicle, which could be a muscle car, pickup truck, tractor, helicopter, or plane.

"Planes are obviously a big change for us, just being able to fly above and already see the opportunities of how to take something on, or you could just drop a bomb on them," Fournier says. "You can also just parachute down in the middle of a location."

Ubisoft is hoping a few key changes help Far Cry 5 break out of the series' mold. Rather than capturing outposts, you go from region to region liberating communities and towns from the cult's control. The series' philosophy of approaching missions however you see fit continues, but expands to how you approach the open world and its story, too.

Radio towers are being left behind, and the map is wide open from the onset. You have the freedom to explore different towns, areas, and missions in any order you wish. "There's no more barriers. Everything is available to you," Fournier says. "Liberating those towns – which are under siege by the Project at Eden's Gate – this is how you're going to be able to find or discover new places or new people, and get access to new resources."

Level designer Vincent Ouellette says with each town you liberate and depending how much destruction you bring to your enemies, your resistence meter – a gauge that measures your in-game progress – slowly fills up. "Basically, we'll have three different regions in the world, each of them having a different herald of the cult," he says. "Doing action against the cult in that region is going to help you build up your resistance and fill up that gauge to get resistance points."

Like past entries, Far Cry 5's narrative includes an extremist enemy, but this time you go head-to-head with an entire organization. Ubisoft is striving for realism and believability, and to do so, the team hired cult expert Rick Ross to guide them in the right direction. Ross, who has been involved in more than 500 cult interventions and is the founder of the non-profit Cult Education Institute, believes that Far Cry 5 provides something unique.

"What Far Cry 5 does is it gives you the ability to go into a destructive cult, to interact with members, and to interact with the leadership," Ross says. "It allows you to really get a feel for the persuasiveness and charisma of the leader, in a way that we could only superficially understand from reading news stories."

Ubisoft hopes that this believability helps immerse players, to the point where they can imagine being recruited into a cult themselves. Creative director Dan Hay explains that they are pushing for "a thin character – a character that doesn't have a lot of meat, so that it allows the player to be able to have their own voice in the game." Players can customize the hero's gender and race at the start – a first for the series.

Ubisoft aims to build a destructive cult that is nuanced and believable. It's an ambitious feat, and while Far Cry 5's setting has been met with criticism by some fans, this experience could be a worthy one if done right. » **Elise Favis**

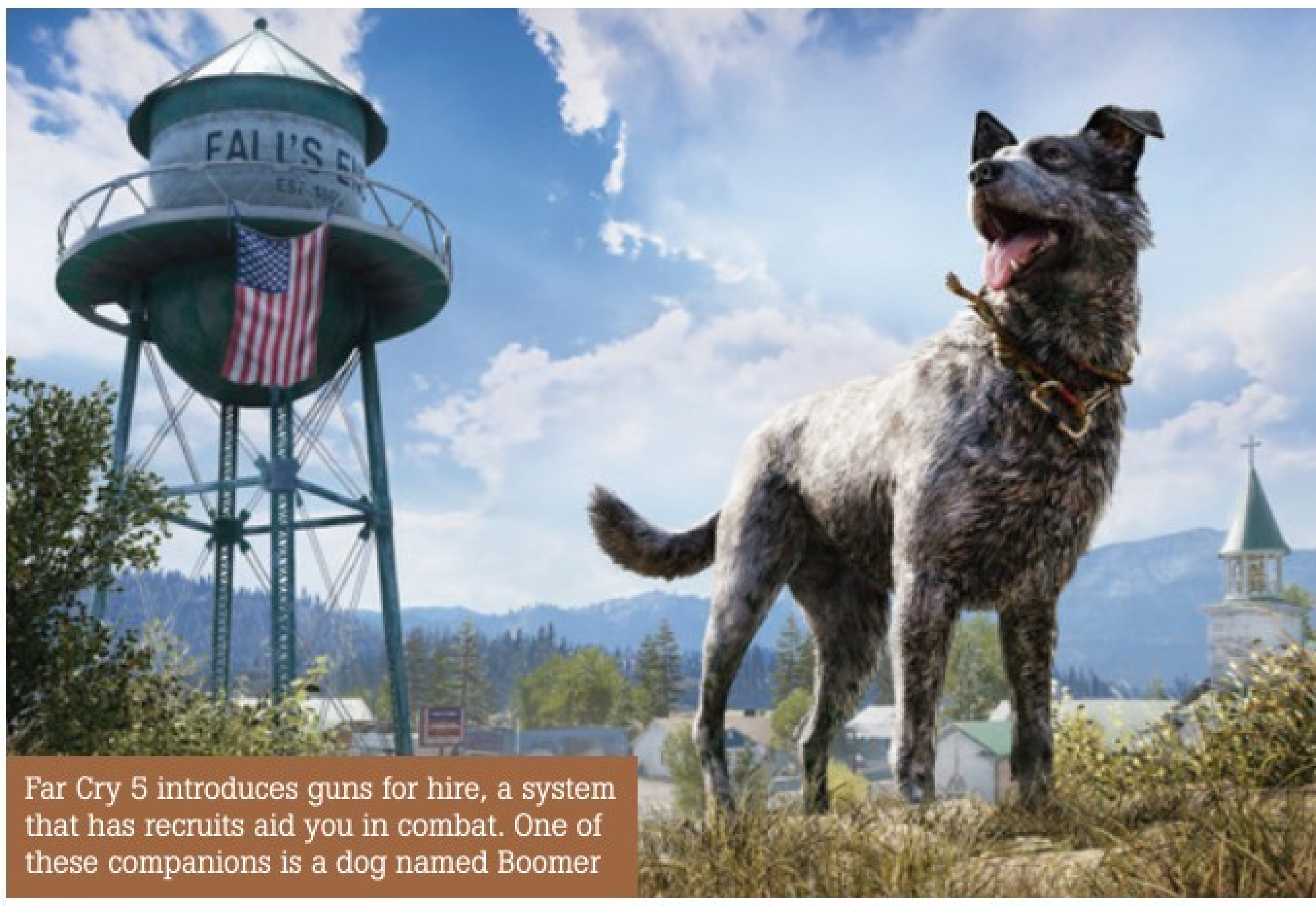
» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter (Multiplayer TBA)

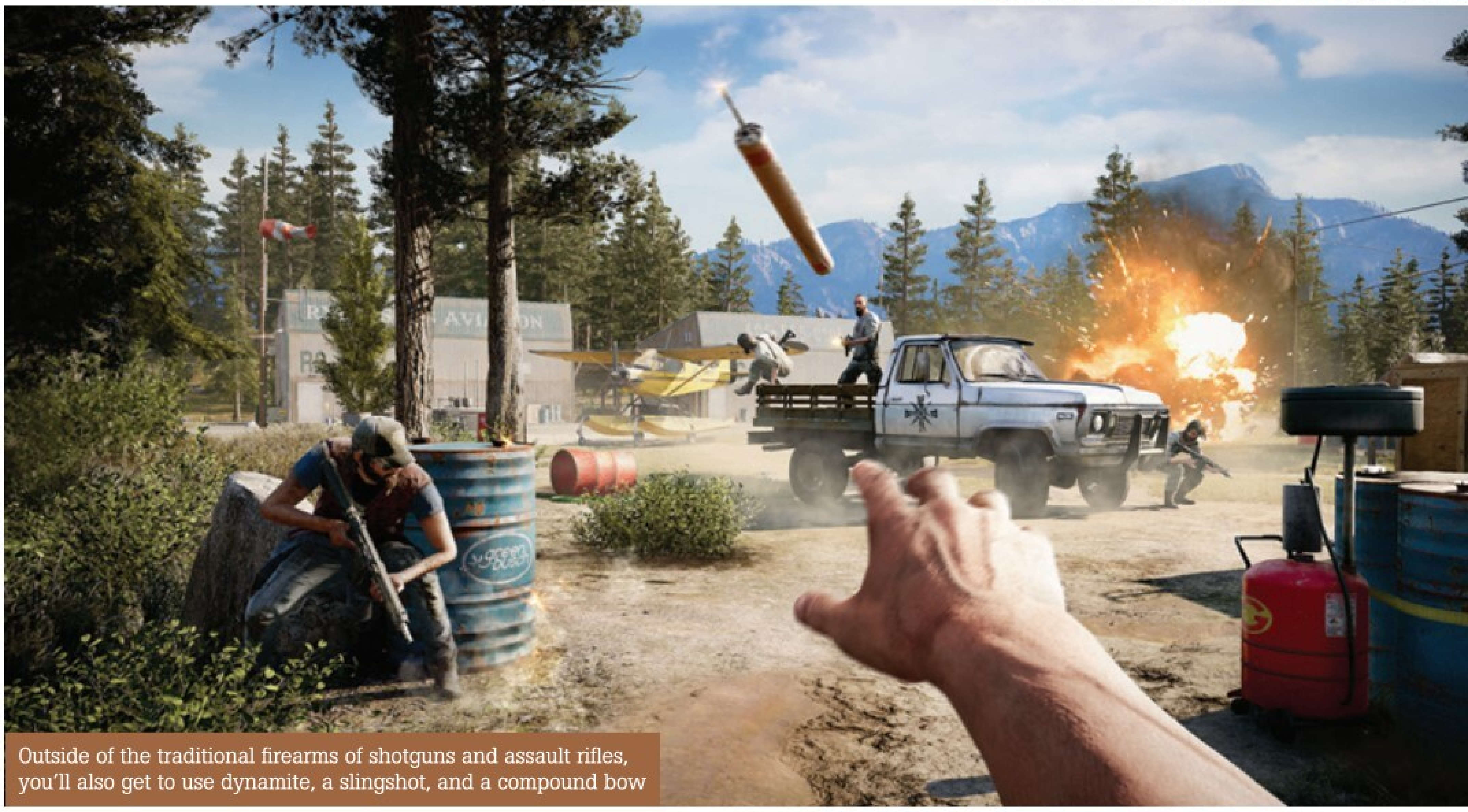
» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

» Release
February 27



Far Cry 5 introduces guns for hire, a system that has recruits aid you in combat. One of these companions is a dog named Boomer



Outside of the traditional firearms of shotguns and assault rifles, you'll also get to use dynamite, a slingshot, and a compound bow

Steep: Road To The Olympics

A major expansion aims for new heights

PyeongChang 2018
8
FRANCE

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online Multiplayer Sports

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Annecy

» Release
December 5

When Ubisoft released Steep last year, the open-world extreme sports title let players explore massive snowy mountains and descend them stylishly. The online multiplayer kept players skiing, tricking, and racing together well after the game released, and Ubisoft Annecy made good on its promise of making Steep a "live" game that evolved as time went on. Steep: Road to the Olympics takes the game in a new direction by introducing the thrill of competing for medals in PyeongChang, South Korea.

As the name implies, Road to the Olympics features a brand-new story mode that challenges players to earn a place in the 2018 Winter Olympics in the big air, half-pipe, and slopestyle events either on skis or a snowboard. "There's this concept of this journey to the Olympics, we wanted to create this storyline so players can have that journey," says Steep game director Arnaud Ragot. "What we have discovered is that it's as interesting to discover what it takes to get to the Olympic games as it is to actually be there." Racing legends like Lindsey Vonn and Bode Miller proffer advice along the journey to the podium.

Outside of the career mode, Road to the Olympics introduces several other open medal events as well, like slalom (both regular and giant varieties), Super-G, downhill, and snocross. If you want to get a high score tricking down a hill, you can now grind rails and stick the landing to impress the judges. Bringing home the gold in slalom requires a real rhythm with your controls and an intense focus on feeling your way between the flags.

It's just a short helicopter ride from South Korea to the new open-world Japanese mountain range also included in the expansion, which makes it easy to skip right over and free roam around these peaceful but dangerous slopes. The snow-covered massifs provide a less structured but exciting place to practice your skills by snowboarding over temple architecture or flying your wingsuit down precipitous drops past cherry blossom trees.

Players worried about being overwhelmed by getting into Steep now should have nothing to worry about. "This expansion is a totally unique game from what we shipped last year," Ragot says. "You have the original Steep, which was a free ride, open-world experience, but on top of that, we have the structured participation in the Olympic games now. It's a huge experience overall and each time will be a new thing for players."

While Steep was announced for Switch earlier in the year, the expansion will only be for the PS4, Xbox One, and PC versions that released in 2016. Ragot assures that the Switch version is still in development, but it is currently not in the cards for Road to the Olympics.

The new Steep content can be purchased for existing owners as an expansion, or new players can get it with Steep Winter Games Gold Edition, which contains all previous DLC and Road to the Olympics with it.

» Imran Khan

Tropico 6

Raiding France's most iconic landmark

When Kalypso first introduced the newest entry in the long-running dictator simulation series, I was impressed by how it embraces the franchise's wacky roots while diving deeper into the realm of serious city building. Tropico 6 gives you a similar toolbox and objectives to that of other city builders; your main goal is to build up your tiny nation to become a world power. However, unlike other city sims, you aren't a benevolent leader by default. Instead, you must balance being a kindhearted president with being a ruthless dictator to stay in power by any means necessary. Do you make your citizens happy at the cost of your budget, then let the election process run its course naturally? Or do you give campaign speeches rife with blame, strategic praise, and empty promises before cooking the votes to cling to power? You must consider these options and more as you proceed in your role as El Presidente.

During my first hands-on session, I took part in a raid, a new mission type that lets you steal landmarks from foreign countries in order to generate revenue and tourism. In that session, my goal was to steal the Statue of Liberty from the United States. Midway though, my spies needed more oil to complete the task, so by providing that, I upped my success rate. This time, I had a new target: France's Eiffel Tower. However, despite the objective remaining the same, it played out much differently.

While I wait for my spies to complete their 34-month mission, I complete as many side objectives as possible to earn some cash and boost my approval rating. Unfortunately, like my previous raid, this mission also hits a snag; all the rivets we lifted got sent to a luggage manufacturer. Now, to retrieve them, I need to build specific amenities to attract French tourists to have them unknowingly bring me their beloved landmark piece by piece.

The trick works and I place the Eiffel Tower right next to my mansion. Shortly after that, I win the election to stay in power for at least a bit longer. I like how this raid, while having a similar objective, delivered a unique experience. I'm excited to see how other raid experiences differ as we creep closer to Tropico's 2018 release. » **Brian Shea**

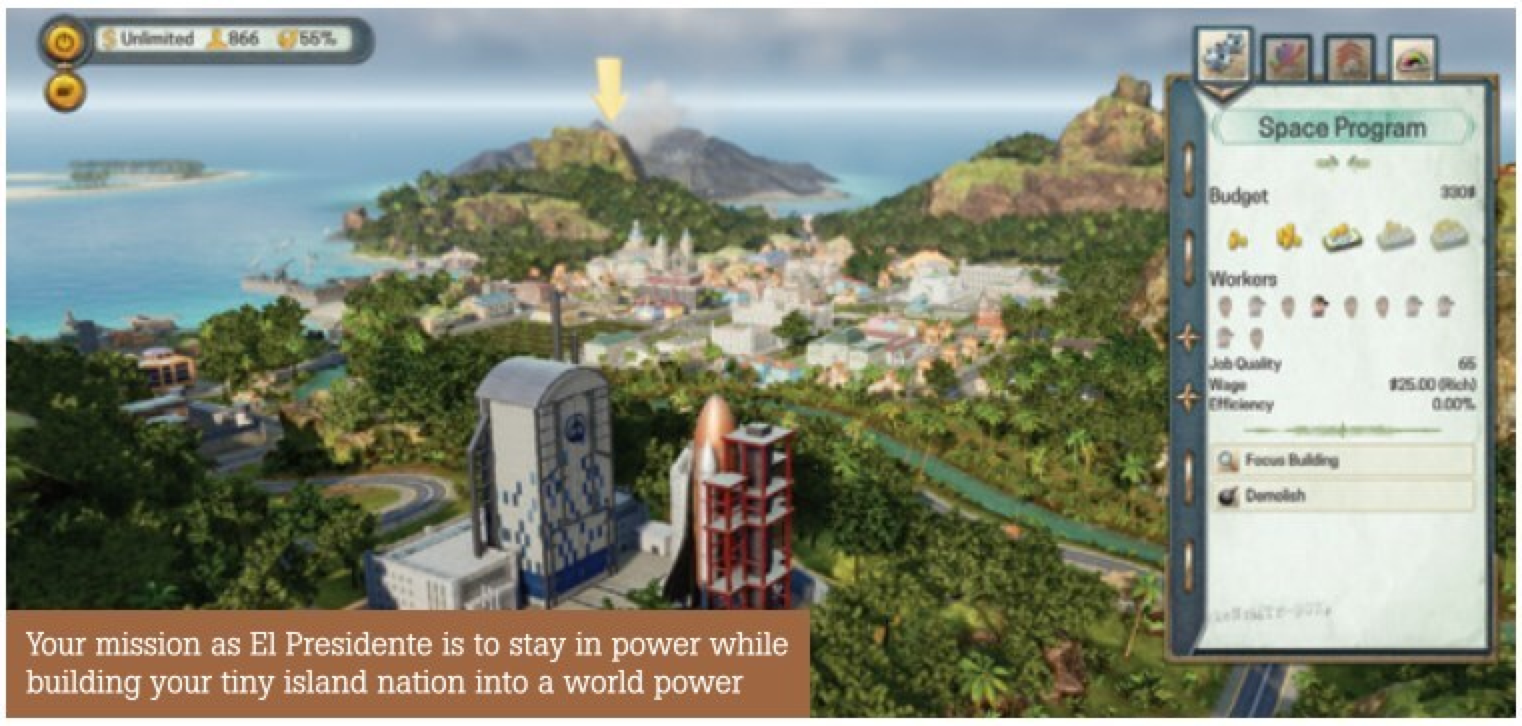
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Simulation

» **Publisher**
Kalypso Media

» **Developer**
Limbic Entertainment

» **Release**
2018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Focus Building
Demolish

Your mission as El Presidente is to stay in power while building your tiny island nation into a world power

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Code Vein

A bloody difficult time

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Bandai Namco

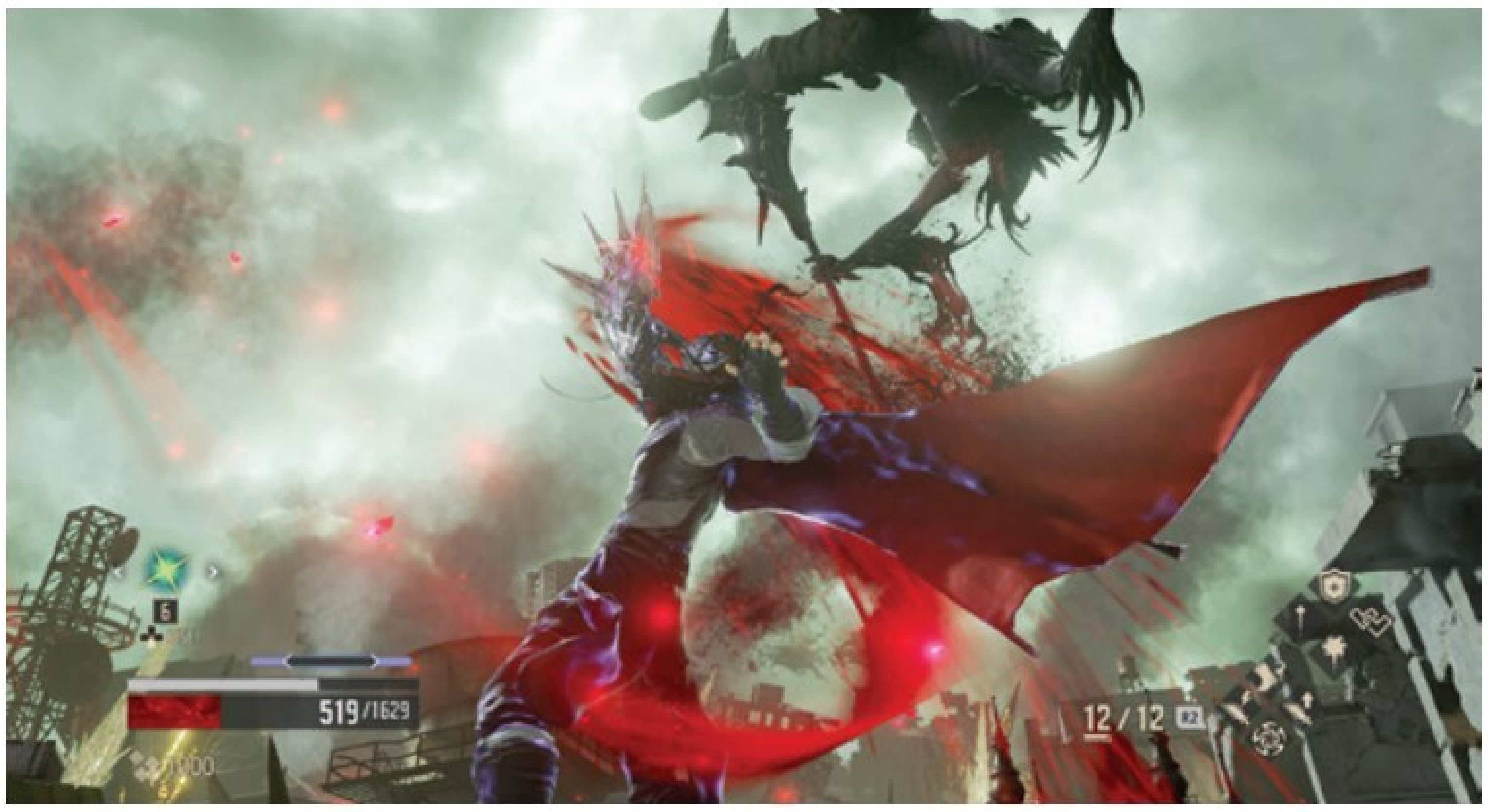
» Developer
Shift

» Release
2018

Not long after wrapping up Dark Souls III with The Ringed City DLC, Bandai Namco partnered with Shift on a new game to fill its Souls void called Code Vein. Persevering through the toughest challenges and telling the tale is something most gamers thrive on; Code Vein embraces the Dark Souls formula fully, not even offering difficulty options. Every player must make it through the same path, accepting death and learning better strategies.

In the world of Code Vein, a queen has corrupted revenants, making them her puppets. Part of your journey involves defeating her, but things take an interesting turn when a red mist appears over the world. Everyone – including you – becomes a bloodthirsty vampire fighting over the limited blood beads available. Can you find a solution and survive the hellish creatures around you?

Code Vein focuses on exploration of an open world, similar to Dark Souls, where everything is connected and you can choose where to go. As you journey into dungeons, you can bring one NPC companion to help out. During your trek, the NPC talks to you and aids you on the battlefield. My companion provided some supportive magic, casting a barrier spell to protect me. I also noticed the NPCs distracting enemies, while I flanked from the other side. As the story progresses, you get more NPCs you can swap between by visiting your home base. I'm interested in seeing how deep the NPC system goes. Do you form relationships with them? Do they have their own interesting tales? Bandai Namco kept mum on how many are in the game and further delving into the story.



Watching your A.I. partner can also give you an idea of how to beat bosses. Bosses all have different phases and their attacks change based on how much damage they've taken. Like many games in this style, you must study enemy patterns to persevere. This is especially true considering developers said in some boss battles, one hit can result in a game over screen.

The controls take some time to wrap your head around, as there are a lot of options. You have defensive abilities like dodging, guarding, and parrying. On the offensive front, you have light and strong attacks alongside a launching attack. The stamina gauge prevents you from spamming any of these actions, forcing you to think tactically.

As a vampire, you have the ability to sneak up on enemies and feed on them using the drain action. This deals a large amount of damage, but also restores your ichor, the resource used to launch special attacks. Up to eight abilities, called focuses, can be equipped at once. Different enemy types require certain weaponry to take down, but you can carry up to two weapons at a time and swap between them at will. In my demo, the character had a massive, heavy sword, but Bandai Namco said he also has access to guns. You can also respec your character on the fly to overcome different obstacles, and this is encouraged as a strategy in the game.

Code Vein looks like a brutal trek that scratches the difficulty itch. If you're a fan of this type of challenge, it's worth keeping an eye on. Whether it can live up to the games it apes, only time will tell. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Gear Club Unlimited

A new world of racing for the Switch

Third-party software support, or lack thereof, for a Nintendo home console is always a hot topic, but developer Eden Games is taking matters into its own hands. The studio behind the Test Drive Unlimited franchise is delivering Gear Club Unlimited onto the Switch on December 1. The game positions itself as a genuine racing experience, but it's attempting to do more than that with a surprising amount of depth and customization.

Eden's Test Drive Unlimited open-world racing franchise last generation had laudable ambitions, but the technical execution needed work. Several years on from that series, the scope of Gear Club Unlimited is different. It's not an open-world game, but that spark of creativity is still evident.

Gear Club Unlimited is not a straight racing simulation; the tracks I raced at various events and locations were geared more toward maximizing speed than testing players' ability to technically enter and exit corners consistently. I could feel the differences between the various licensed cars (including rally cars). They all were responsive to throttle, brake, and steering inputs, something that should be further affected by the tuning system.

Apart from a map of hundreds of races, the heart of Gear Club Unlimited is your performance shop where you upgrade your stable of cars. Not only can you set a visual theme for your shop (including '50s-style diner and nightclub wrappers), but you can place individual elements like arcade cabinets (which boost your mechanics' abilities) around the large space to make it your own. This is more than just a fancy garage. Seven workshops are spread around the floor pertaining to upgrading your cars' performance and cosmetics. The mechanics workshop deals with your engine and gearbox, while the pneumatics workshop is for tires and brakes. Drop a car in and get to work tweaking and test driving your vehicles to find the performance trade-offs that suit your driving style, as well as change cosmetic configurations like spoilers and side skirts. You can even visit other players' shops to see how they set up their cars.

Gear Club Unlimited has both offline four-player splitscreen multiplayer as well as seasons of online time trials tasking you with laying down your best time versus the ghost cars of up to seven players. Currently the online package is limited to leaderboards, but Eden plans to release other multiplayer modes as free DLC, and the offline multiplayer still conveys a good sense of speed and excitement.

Gear Club Unlimited wants to be more than just a racing game that checks a genre box for the Switch. It wants to fulfill a specific vision of conveying Eden Games' love of cars and tuning them, as well as give players an outlet for their own creativity and racing abilities. » **Matthew Kato**

» Platform
Switch

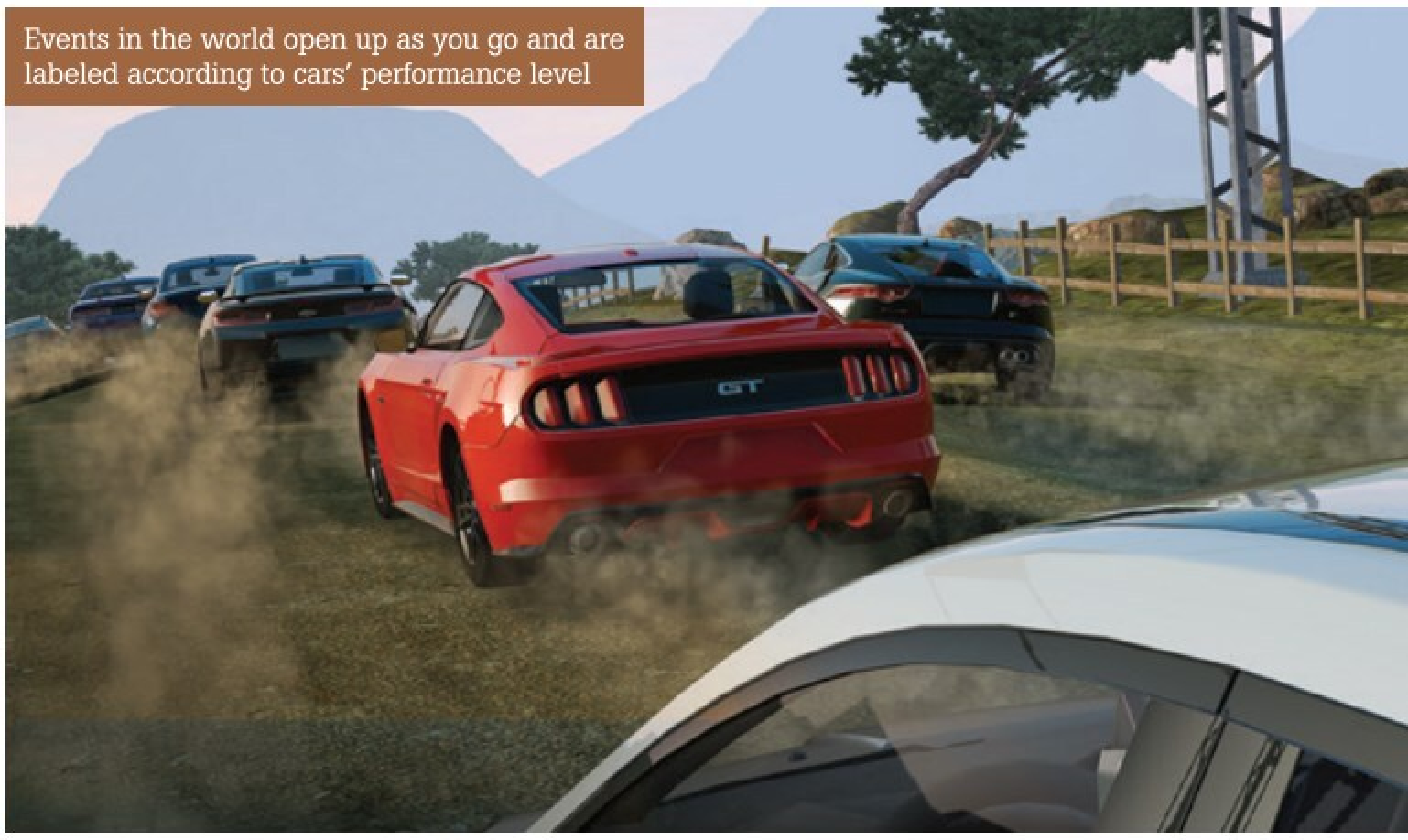
» Style
1 to 4-Player Racing

» Publisher
Microids

» Developer
Eden Games

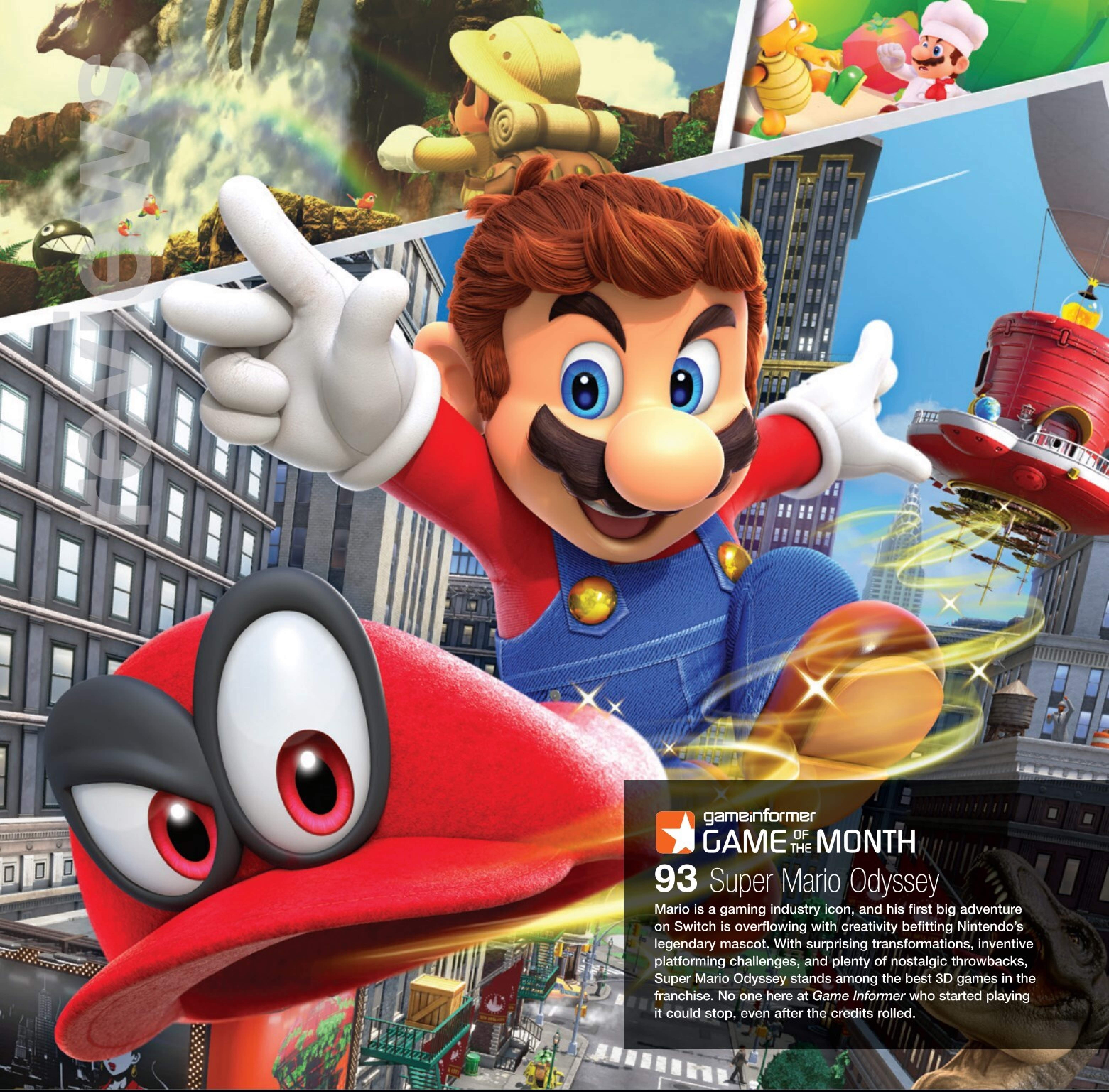
» Release
November 21

Rally racing is fast fun that plays with the responsiveness of throwing your car into tight turns



Events in the world open up as you go and are labeled according to cars' performance level

reviews



gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

93 Super Mario Odyssey

Mario is a gaming industry icon, and his first big adventure on Switch is overflowing with creativity befitting Nintendo's legendary mascot. With surprising transformations, inventive platforming challenges, and plenty of nostalgic throwbacks, Super Mario Odyssey stands among the best 3D games in the franchise. No one here at *Game Informer* who started playing it could stop, even after the credits rolled.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Giving Tom Nook access to your credit card number.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Middle-earth: Shadow Of War

A sandbox for predators

9.5

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive
Developer Monolith Productions **Release** October 10 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Return to Mordor on a mission of conquest and vengeance, fighting endless fantasy villains in a systemic sequence of epic confrontations

» **Graphics**
Gorgeous environments, characters, and creatures call to mind the films directed by Peter Jackson

» **Sound**
Excellent voice actors bring the story to life, and a militaristic orchestral score punctuates the action, sometimes integrating individual sword strikes into the musical soundscape

» **Playability**
The complex web of abilities and skills is tutorialized gradually, as the game recognizes unused abilities and prompts their use

» **Entertainment**
You are a merciless tornado of ruin touching down in an unforgiving world of battle and domination, and there's plenty of joy to be found in embracing that unfettered power

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Shadow of War is a playground of intense and emergent action scenes shaped by your choices and triumphs. Hundreds of missions unfold across a vast territory of five open-world regions, many appearing in direct response to your previous actions and pitting you against individual named enemies that remember you between encounters. Whether in the opening minutes of stealth or the frenzied melees that inevitably follow, combat is rich and rewarding, offering dozens of ways to bring down the denizens of Mordor. The overriding sensation is that of a sandbox of superpowered predation and exploration in a world where you are the prime mover, and on a scale that dramatically outstrips its predecessor.

Developer Monolith exhibits a thorough understanding and deep love of Tolkien's grand fantasy world and its themes, and I appreciate the constant ways Shadow of War nods to its source material. But the storyline launches in its own over-the-top direction; Middle-earth fans who can leave their reverence at the door will find a rewarding tale drenched in the darker elements of the fiction. Dramatic reinventions of characters like Shelob and the nature of the Nazgûl feel strange at first, but viewed independently of Tolkien canon, the logical leaps are no more outlandish than other fantasy stories.

Continuing their quest for vengeance, Talion and Celebrimbor forge a new Ring of Power and set out to conquer Mordor. Rather than follow a single central plot, the story splits along multiple threads, from confronting the threat of the ringwraiths to helping a beleaguered spirit hold back a cabal of necromancers. The pace is always brisk, but I enjoyed all of the largely self-contained plotlines and the way they shed light on a land drenched in sorrow and warfare. Everything comes together in a satisfying final turn, setting up the canonical events of The Lord of the Rings and maintaining the open-world gameplay for some dramatic new twists post-campaign.

The nemesis enemy system presents a tremendous variety of adversaries and conflicts, each shaped by your interactions. I haven't played another game with the same diversity and personality in its foes, and the number of spoken snippets to establish the characters is astounding. Distinct strengths, weaknesses, and quirks are meaningful when you fight them, and equally so once you dominate them and send them out to do your bidding. New nemesis missions pop up all the time, and while they might distract you from an objective, they are also engaging and add complexity. The systemic skirmishes reach their heights with the fortress assaults, in which dozens of combatants duke it out to control Mordor's greatest bastions, with your customized army facing off against the worst Sauron can muster.

With its brutal animations, explosive magical abilities, and breakneck pace, Talion's engagements provide a potent power fantasy. If there's a flaw, it's that enemies are often profoundly stupid, not seeing your stealth approach from only yards away, or blindly charging past an explosive barrel as you aim your detonating hammer throw. I enjoy the sense of mastery and control that emerges, even if at times I wondered at my enemies' ineptitude. Across dozens of hours, the endless dominations and frantic battles teeter toward sameness. The tedium is mostly kept at bay through constant skill unlocks, new weapons, and enemies of ever-increasing power.

From the hellscape of Gorgoroth to the sickly green of Minas Morgul, the five regions are a visual treat. Twisting caverns, deep pits, and towering mountains lend a needed geometry that Shadow of Mordor lacked. Traversal and navigation is a breeze thanks to wraith-powered speed and jump powers, mounts, and a smart fast-travel system. Like the battles themselves, the numerous regions of Mordor have a potential to bleed together after dozens of hours of adventure. Even so, Monolith has provided a massive playspace with a lot of artistic range.

Confronting online vendettas and fort conquests has players seeking revenge for defeated fellow players, or taking over players' best protected castles. These online tasks are fun, but mirror similar experiences the game already offers elsewhere. An online market of strong weapons and allies is available through both in-game currency and real money. The lure of microtransaction shortcuts is unappealing, but their optional nature and alternate (if slower) in-game paths to the same rewards make it no more egregious than equally banal systems in other contemporary games.

Shadow of War fulfills the promise of its predecessor, completing a dark and violent lost tale set within the world of The Lord of the Rings. I was initially frustrated by the liberties Monolith takes with this beloved fiction (which are plentiful), but I eventually abandoned myself to the insanity, and fell down the rabbit hole into a superb fantasy adventure. Monolith captures the thrill of power with aplomb; the way it simultaneously speaks of its dangers and corrupting potential is the real magic. » **Matt Miller**

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South Park: The Fractured But Whole

Bigger, longer, and improved

8.75

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft San Francisco **Release** October 17 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
The "new kid" goes on another adventure in South Park, this time skewering the current superhero media trend and a thousand other topics

» Graphics
The Fractured But Whole is indistinguishable from the show, making it feel like you're playing through an interactive, elongated episode

» Sound
Trey Parker and Matt Stone's voicework is hilarious, and all the familiar musical themes from the show are present. The original orchestrated soundtrack perfectly frames the epic story the children are playing out

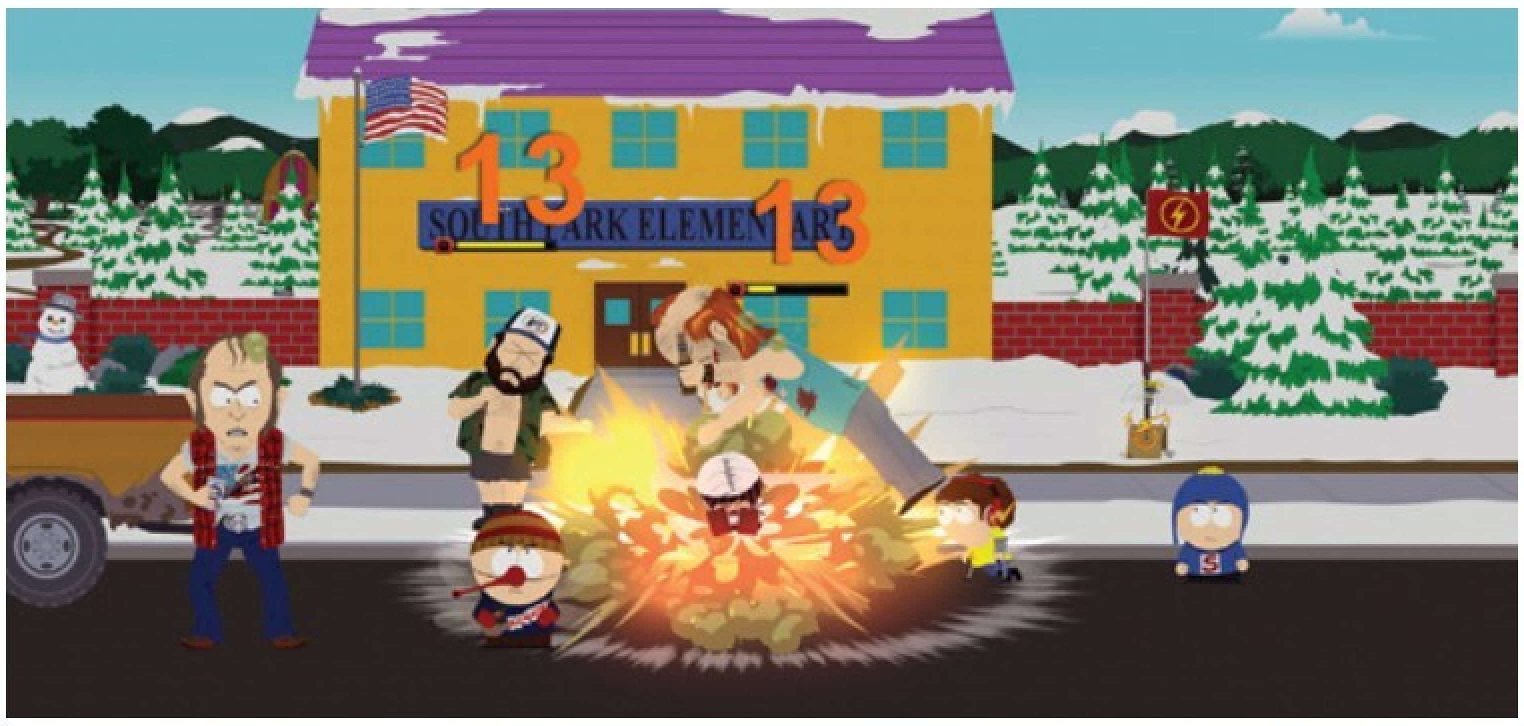
» Playability
Getting caught on environmental geometry is a minor annoyance. Otherwise, navigating combat, QTEs, and assorted menus works well

» Entertainment
The Fractured But Whole is a worthy follow-up to one of the best video game adaptations of a TV show ever made. It has consistent humor, a story with a satisfying pay-off, and a fun new combat system

» Replay Value
Moderate

Since it began airing in 1997, *South Park* has challenged what a television show should be. It killed a recurring character every episode during its early years, and had a series retrospective clip show episode in the middle of its second season. Series creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone looked at the animated television medium and said, "We're going to do something different." For 2015's The Stick of Truth, they took a similar approach, poking fun at video game tropes all while showing a clear appreciation for the medium. Parker and Stone continue with this idea in The Fractured But Whole, a sequel that parodies video games while telling a new story and making smart modifications to improve the overall experience.

The biggest change between Stick of Truth and Fractured But Whole (other than its development studio) is the combat. The Stick of Truth followed in Paper Mario's footsteps, while the sequel has concocted its own system that finds a middle ground between turn-based combat and grid-based tactics. Attacks are still selected from a menu and can be augmented with a timed button press, but you move your team around on a small grid, and every action conforms to a specific pattern. For example, using attacks to push enemies to either side of a party member who can attack in two directions at once is always satisfying. The use of the grid makes individual encounters more thoughtful, and having full control of the kids as you set up each attack gives you a greater sense of agency over the fight. You're not just standing still selecting from a menu – you're moving around and lining things up. The end result is a more engaging combat system than Stick of Truth's.



With the direct involvement of its creators, Fractured But Whole's story is unsurprisingly a full-on South Park story in all the right ways. Nearly all of its plot devices revolve around farts, making it juvenile and disgusting. But moments of thought-provoking commentary surround South Park's racist police force and the mayoral election. It even pulls off heartfelt moments in the midst of its cavalcade of offensive jokes, with a few quiet moments reflecting on the difficulty of being a new kid in a new town with troubled parents. Though playing the previous game is not a requirement, the story picks up nearly where Stick of Truth left off, with Cartman arbitrarily deciding it's time to play super heroes instead of fantasy. From there, the town destroys itself around the children as they maintain their pretend world and rules.

South Park the show, for better and worse, sometimes goes too far off the rails and collapses under its own absurdity. This story, however, wraps up in a satisfying way while still breaking off into the right amount of absurd. The humor plays with video game tropes in smart ways, like how the Okama Game Sphere console in your room is stuck updating throughout the course of the game. The writers also take plenty of time to make fun of celebrity culture and the current political atmosphere. I didn't fall into any gigantic fits of laughter at big punchlines, but I was usually chuckling or smiling at something happening on screen.

Social media is also among Fractured but Whole's parody targets, and it is implemented well into the story and gameplay with selfies and followers being a major form of leveling. Tracking down all the familiar characters of South Park and solving small puzzles or performing tasks to convince them to take a selfie with you became one of my favorite side quests, and it all pays off in the finale.

Crafting is another new addition, and while I enjoyed finding ingredients to concoct story-specific items, the economy of found objects is strangely balanced. I had way too much of nearly everything, but was always short a tortilla or bottle to make health-restoring items. The necessity of having to buy those two items made it feel like I was just going to an in-game store to buy the items pre-made. In that sense, crafting feels like an extra barrier to receiving items instead of a fun place to experiment with the overflowing inventory.

The Fractured but Whole is a welcome sequel, maintaining the standard of quality set by the previous game and, in a broader sense, all of Parker and Stone's work. Every aspect is overloaded with both smart and immature jokes, the combat is an improvement, and the sneaky moments of sincerity make you recall the charm of childhood in surprising ways – just like the show.

» Kyle Hilliard

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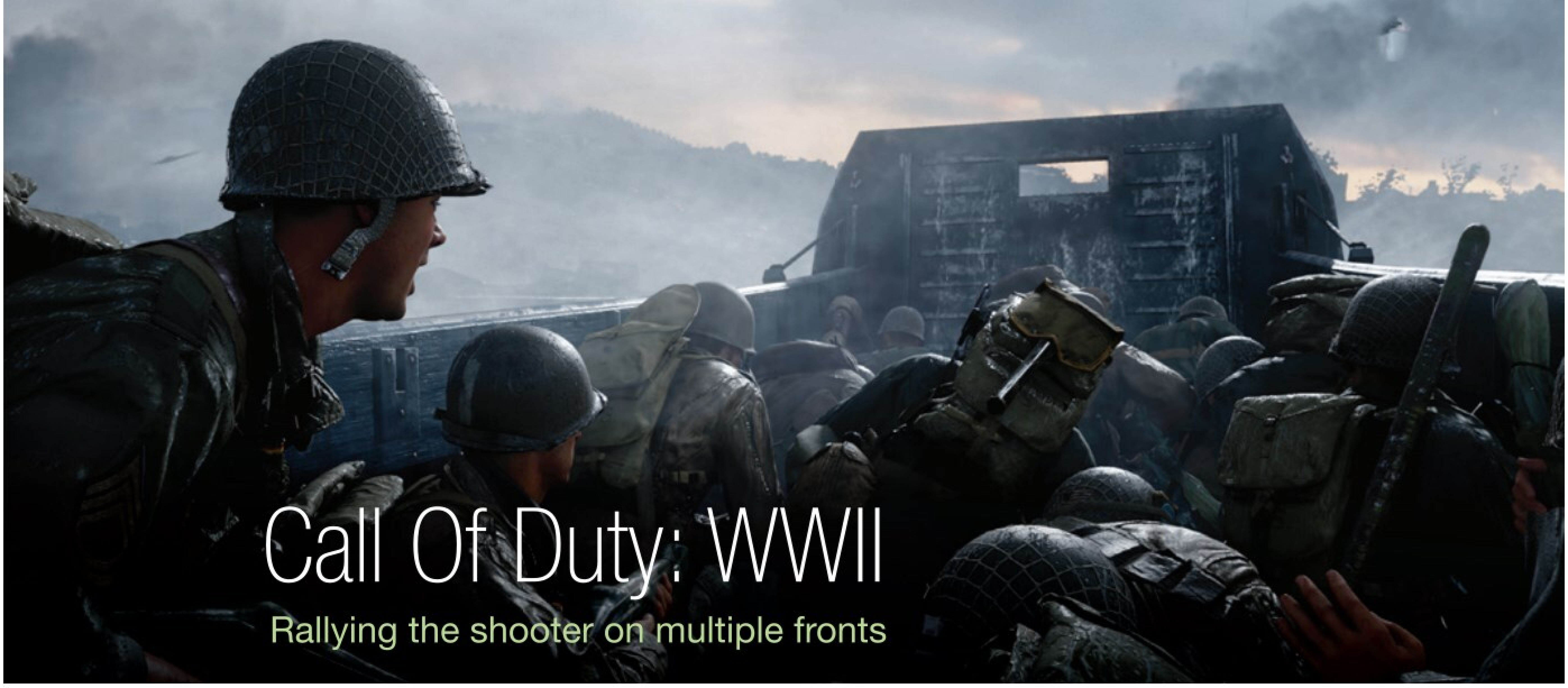


Call Of Duty: WWII

Rallying the shooter on multiple fronts

8.75

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Shooter (18-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Sledgehammer Games **Release** November 3 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Explore a historically rooted campaign, spooky puzzles in zombie mode, and class-based customization with a social hub in multiplayer

» Graphics
The big moments like landing at Normandy feel incredible. You can almost taste the spray of the water hitting the Higgins boats

» Sound
Classic WWII sound effects and the ping of the Garand clip combined with a solid score place you directly in the middle of 20th century warfare

» Playability
Easy to pick up and play, with plenty to master as you drill down into various playstyles for advanced rewards and loadouts. The Nazi Zombies mode is more accessible than ever, without sacrificing daunting and devious secrets

» Entertainment
While the campaign suffers from uninspiring clichés and endless killing fields, the multiplayer options are excellent and bring the series back from the future

» Replay Value
High

Every year, Call of Duty presents a multifaceted package catering to every possible playstyle. That wealth of content continues with Call of Duty: WWII, which features a historically focused campaign, a zombie mode designed to puzzle and scare, and classic multiplayer combat rooted in class-based playstyles and a brand new social hub. Of the many features on deck, only the campaign falters. The rest of the package is as solid as ever, and for old-school fans of the franchise tired of laser beams and jetpacks, the title provides an epic return to classic warfare.

Through the eyes of a Texan kid out for glory, you land on the beaches of Normandy, battle through occupied France, and eventually bring the fight into the heart of Germany. While the experiences you face are huge WWII battles captured with appropriate grandiose backdrops, the only chapter that truly stands out is one where you don't fire your weapon at all – an infiltration mission that takes you deep into the heart of Gestapo HQ. The characters in your squad are forgettable cardboard cutouts, a throwaway cast that seems like a slipshod assemblage of *Saving Private Ryan*, *Band of Brothers*, and *Platoon*. The people you meet from British and French factions are far more interesting, and steal the show when they are around.

The campaign captures Call of Duty's signature explosive feel through various adrenaline-fueled moments like chases, a tank vs tank segment, and firing AA guns. However, the standard gunplay and endless killing fields often feel like a slog, taking down hundreds of enemies and moving to the next defensive position. Counting on your squad for ammo, enemy positions, health packs, grenades, and strikes offers some novelty near the beginning of the game, but once you settle in, these elements display no important differentiation from classic hide-until-your-health-returns gameplay.

Traditional multiplayer is the shining star of the three modes. The new objective-oriented War mode includes all kinds of various activities such as moving a tank, building a bridge, and capturing point after point, so traditional gunning for a big kill-death-assist ratio is a thing of the past. If you're looking for something that has established front lines and rewards for working as a team (and where you won't get gunned down in the back less than a second after you spawn) War is worth a look.

The class-centric division system combined with 20th century weaponry feels wonderful. Selecting your division and its focus on various weapons and playstyles is meaningful and enjoyable to explore. While perks are gone, you still have tons of customization available, and the slower speeds make the gameplay more compelling than attempting to abuse wall-running and power-sliding. Sneaking and sniping with the Lee-Enfield in the Mountain division or unloading a bucket of incendiary shotgun shells into the enemy as Expeditionary is exhilarating. If you just want to get those crisp shots off with the Garand and execute an occasional bayonet charge on an opportune target, you can.

By eliminating the standard lobby and giving you a place to play in between games, Headquarters is a fun and lightweight experience. You can watch 1v1s, test guns at the shooting range, prestige, and pick up missions. You can even play a fairly extensive list of ancient Activision games like Pitfall II, Demon Attack, and Boxing. This social space is an awesome inclusion that makes your downtime interesting, and I can't see it going away now. Supply drops earned through gameplay are opened in this social space, hooking up any onlookers with bonuses from time to time. All drops are cosmetic and it's a lot of fun cracking crates and outfitting your character with new uniforms, emotes, pistol grips, and more.

Nazi Zombies is the scariest iteration of the mode that has graced a Call of Duty title, boasting some jump scares and an absolutely occult vision of the Final Reich. Casual players coming over from other modes should have no problem surviving for much longer than they have in previous entries. However, the focus remains on discovery; players must do much more than slaughter legions of zombies, such as enabling an escape-tube network, powering up generators, unlocking a weapon power-up station, finding clues hidden in paintings, and more. Nazi Zombies plays more like a structured story than previous versions, with themed encounters hitting alongside the standard wave-based fare. Permanent progression aspects give a continuing sense of advancement as they unlock tokens from playthrough to playthrough, which you can spend on new mods to enhance your characters and loadouts, giving meaning to even the most bitter defeats. Discovering just a bit more each time heading underneath the snow-packed earth of Mittelburg is a grisly, enjoyable experience.

While the campaign fails to provide a compelling tale and is often bogged down in uninteresting large-scale slaughter, Call of Duty: WWII nails its multiplayer, new social hub, and zombie modes to provide the back to boot-on-the-ground experience fans have clamored for since the first futuristic foray. **» Daniel Tack**

SteamWorld Dig 2

Digging even deeper

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action/Platforming **Publisher** Image & Form Games **Developer** Image & Form Games **Release** September 21 (Switch), September 22 (PC), September 26 (PS4, Vita) **Rating** E10+

8.5

PS4 • Switch
Vita • PC

» **Concept**
Return to the SteamWorld universe with a sequel that takes inspiration from games like Metroid, but with more mining and fewer horrifying aliens

» **Graphics**
Attractive art makes the world pop, so you can easily pick out the important parts of the action and interface

» **Sound**
Though it didn't seem like anything special at first, the music grew on me – especially the town theme in El Machino

» **Playability**
Navigating the mines works well, and using the different parts of your arsenal is much easier than the last entry

» **Entertainment**
The "dig, upgrade, repeat" formula never gets old thanks to fun gameplay and a steady stream of new powers

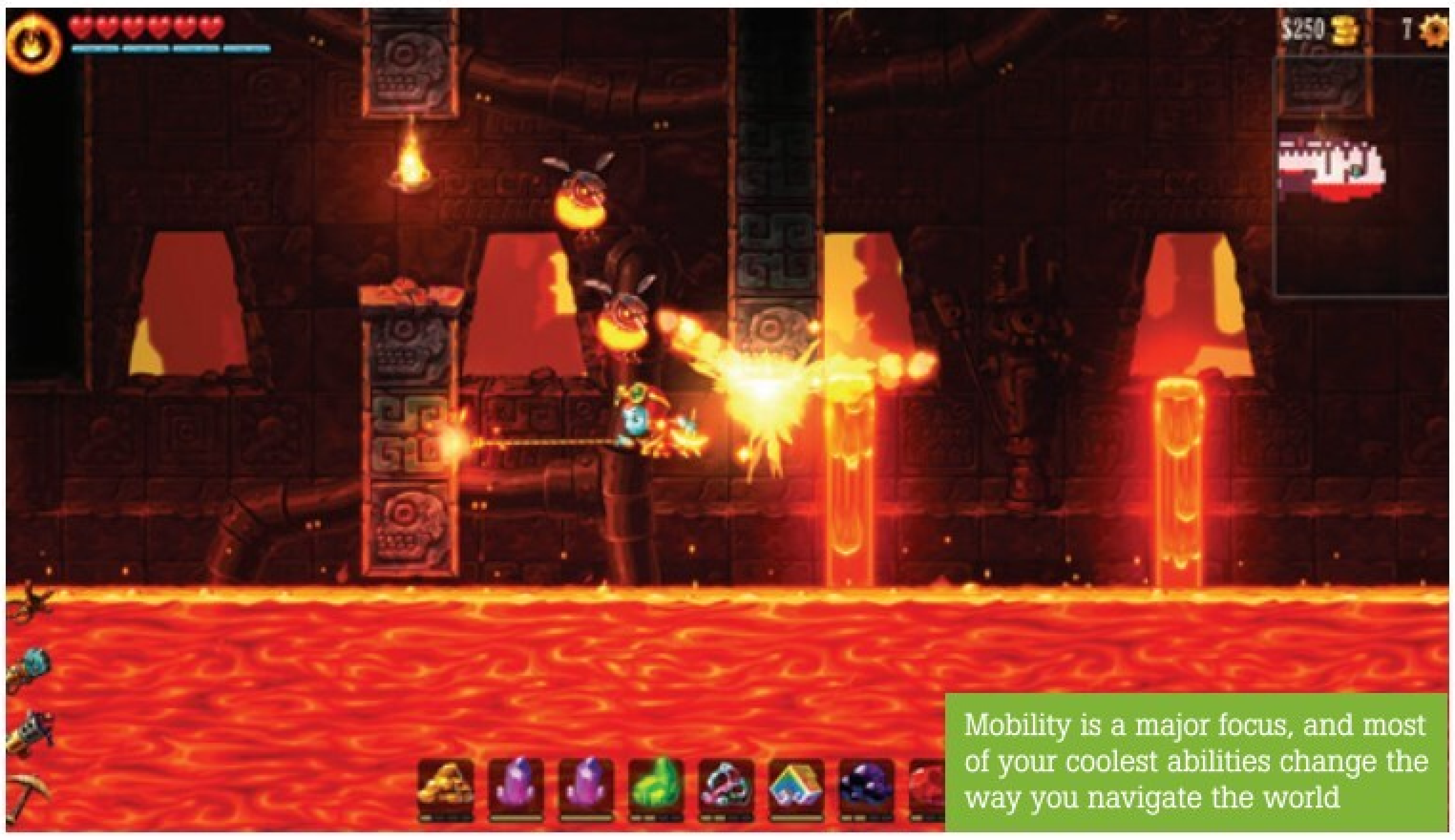
» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The original SteamWorld Dig was defined by its rewarding progression loop, fun exploration, and steam-powered cast. As a mining robot, your job was to excavate resources, then spend the money on items and abilities to make you even better at excavating resources. That simple, addictive formula still applies to SteamWorld Dig 2, but developer Image & Form Games has tightened the screws and polished the chassis, resulting in a sequel that feels like an upgrade in every way.

You control Dot (formerly a side character), who is searching for Rusty (formerly the hero) in a machine-populated version of the Old West. You don't need experience with the original to enjoy this sequel; though a story plays out in scattered scenes, SteamWorld Dig 2's narrative serves primarily as an excuse to send you into the mine near the desert town of El Machino. The characters are fun and their dialogue is entertaining, but the loop of digging, upgrading, and more digging is what makes the experience so engaging.

Like other games that follow in Metroid's footsteps, SteamWorld Dig 2 limits your power and mobility at the beginning. Dot can basically only jump and swing her pickaxe, but that's good enough to start hacking through the dirt. You fill up your limited bag space with the valuables you find by digging (fighting enemies along the way), then take a trip back to town to cash in and buy better gear. Hold more resources with a bigger bag, function underground longer with more lantern fuel, or chop the ground quicker with an improved pickaxe. I had trouble choosing among the array of available upgrades, because each one has a noticeable effect on your efficiency and profit. This cycle had me hooked, and I would often take "just one more trip" down into the mine to hit the next tier on a piece of equipment.

Once you buy basic upgrades with your earnings, you also open up additional augmentations that you invest in with cogs. This is a brilliant and flexible system that introduces a new world of experimentation. Since cogs are refundable, I enjoyed toying around with abilities in different situations. For instance, when I was dying frequently in one section, I put cogs into an ability that allowed me to keep some resources I had collected (rather than losing them completely) upon death.



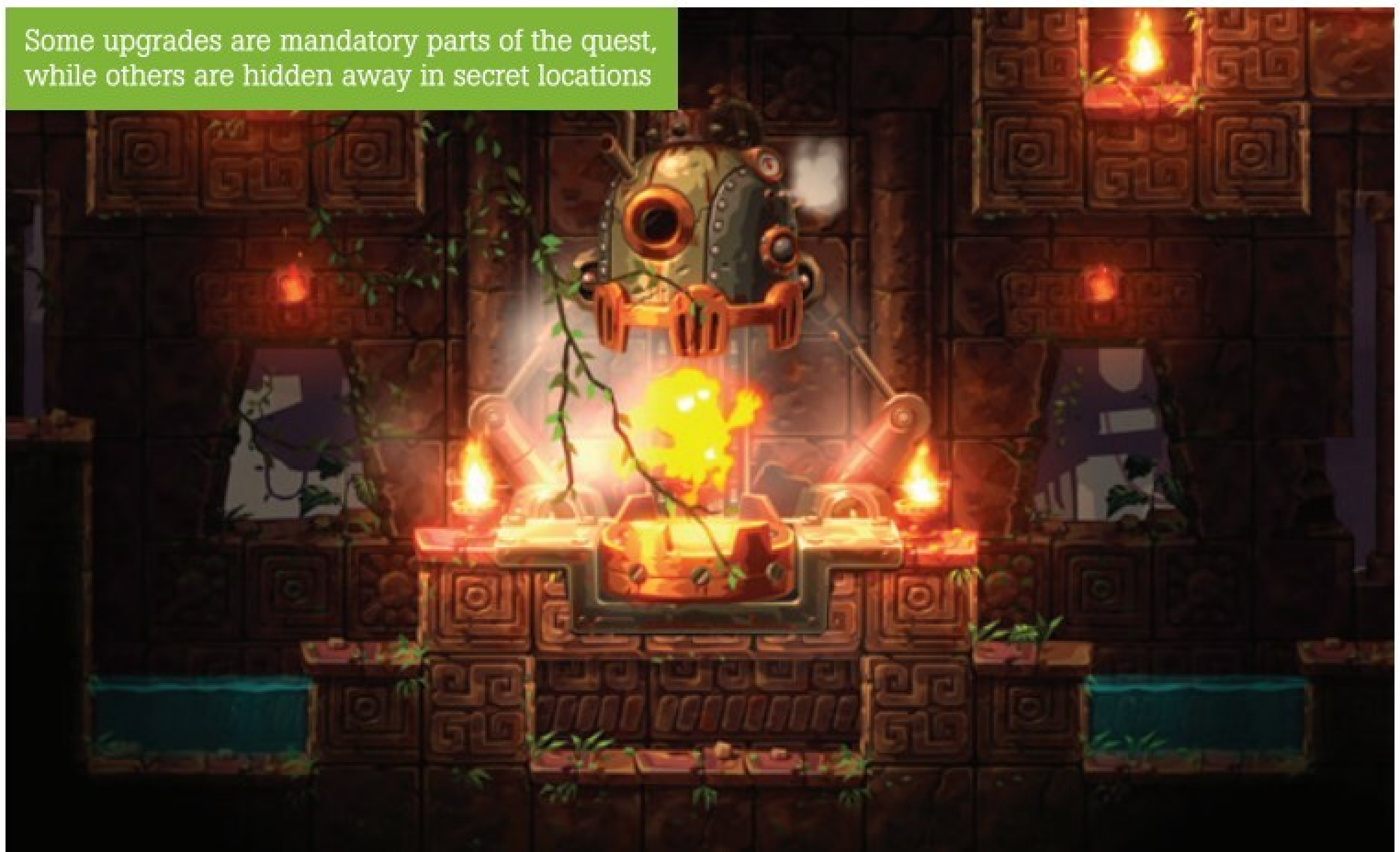
Mobility is a major focus, and most of your coolest abilities change the way you navigate the world

The cog mechanic also puts some great aspirational upgrades on the horizon for players; I couldn't wait until I upgraded my bomb enough that I could fire it in mid-air, since I knew of several hidden areas that ability would open up. Depending on how you allocate your cogs, you might be able to hover indefinitely in mid air, walk across lava, and automatically identify secret blocks. Beyond the simple thrill of getting stronger and stronger, I enjoy how this extra layer of upgrading gradually removes the barriers that prevent you from exploring every nook and cranny of the large map.

Your expanding arsenal is good for more than just digging deeper. You encounter various puzzle caves during your expedition, and these often require you to use tools like your grappling hook and bombs in unexpected ways. Sometimes success is a matter of problem-solving, and other times it's more about whether or not you have the right upgrades. The puzzle caves are usually brief but clever, with cogs and/or collectibles as your typical reward, which made me systematically seek out and clear these fun diversions.

My biggest criticism of SteamWorld Dig 2 is the combat. Exploration and mining have lots of depth, but when you throw bad guys into the mix, the experience gets shallow. Your damage-dealing options are limited, and most enemies have predictable patterns and too little health. Fighting feels more like a nuisance, since it slows you down without being challenging or interesting. The same holds true for the handful of boss fights; even though they function just fine, the encounters feel perfunctory. Dodging waves of fireballs while you wait to hit an exposed weak spot doesn't fit naturally with the rest of the gameplay framework.

SteamWorld Dig 2 is impeccably paced, with new powers and options opening up just when you were getting comfortable with your current loadout. The world is fun to move around, the characters are charming, and the process of gradually increasing your efficiency is airtight. Even with some lackluster combat, more intuitive controls and focus on mobility make it even better than the original. For a series all about digging down, SteamWorld Dig 2 is a clear step up. » **Joe Juba**



Some upgrades are mandatory parts of the quest, while others are hidden away in secret locations

Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus

A bloody and unforgettable revolution

9.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Retake America from the Nazis with a gun in one hand and a hatchet in the other in this epic, violent road trip

» Graphics
Character models and animations are top-notch, and the alternate-history versions of locations like Roswell and New Orleans are stunning to behold

» Sound
Mick Gordon's soundtrack thumps and wails in all the right places, and the thunk of an axe sinking into a Nazi's skull never gets old

» Playability
The first hour is challenging, but flexible systems make it a surprisingly forgiving shooter as the game goes on

» Entertainment
Wolfenstein II brings the gruesome thrills and spins an unforgettable story filled with believable characters fighting for a better world

» Replay Value
Moderately high

gameinformer PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** MachineGames **Release** October 27 **Rating** M

Wolfenstein: The New Order was a bold attempt to reinvent the first-person shooter that kickstarted the genre. Taking place in an alternate history where the Nazis won the war, protagonist B.J. Blazkowicz tried to take back the world with the help of resistance fighters hiding in the sewers of Berlin. The New Order shined through with its story, focusing on a diverse cast of people trying to hold on to scraps of hope. The sequel trades somberness for fury, and in doing so emerges as one of the best first-person shooters and narrative-driven games I've ever played.

Things kicks off on a grim note, with B.J. awaking crippled after the events of the first game. You are in the middle of the action almost immediately, roaming around a U-boat in a wheelchair and blasting Nazis. The game gets zanier from there. I rode a mechanical fire-breathing dog of death chasing armored troops down the streets of New Orleans. I infiltrated a massive airship. The New Colossus is constantly upping the ante and making the most of its locations, like Reich-occupied Roswell, where the Ku Klux Klan walk arm-in-arm with Nazis. From propaganda adorning walls to background sequences with characters talking amongst themselves about their struggles, Wolfenstein II goes all-in on making its world a breathing place filled with atrocities and architectural wonders.

The levels range from satisfying to astounding, requiring you to constantly change tactics. The winding tunnels of New York allow you to sneak with ease as you take down hazmat-suit wearing Nazis, but the open streets of New Orleans require more thought given their openness. The more standout levels I won't discuss for spoiler reasons, but I will say that one of them clearly draws inspiration from *The Wizard of Oz* and is something that has to be experienced to be believed.

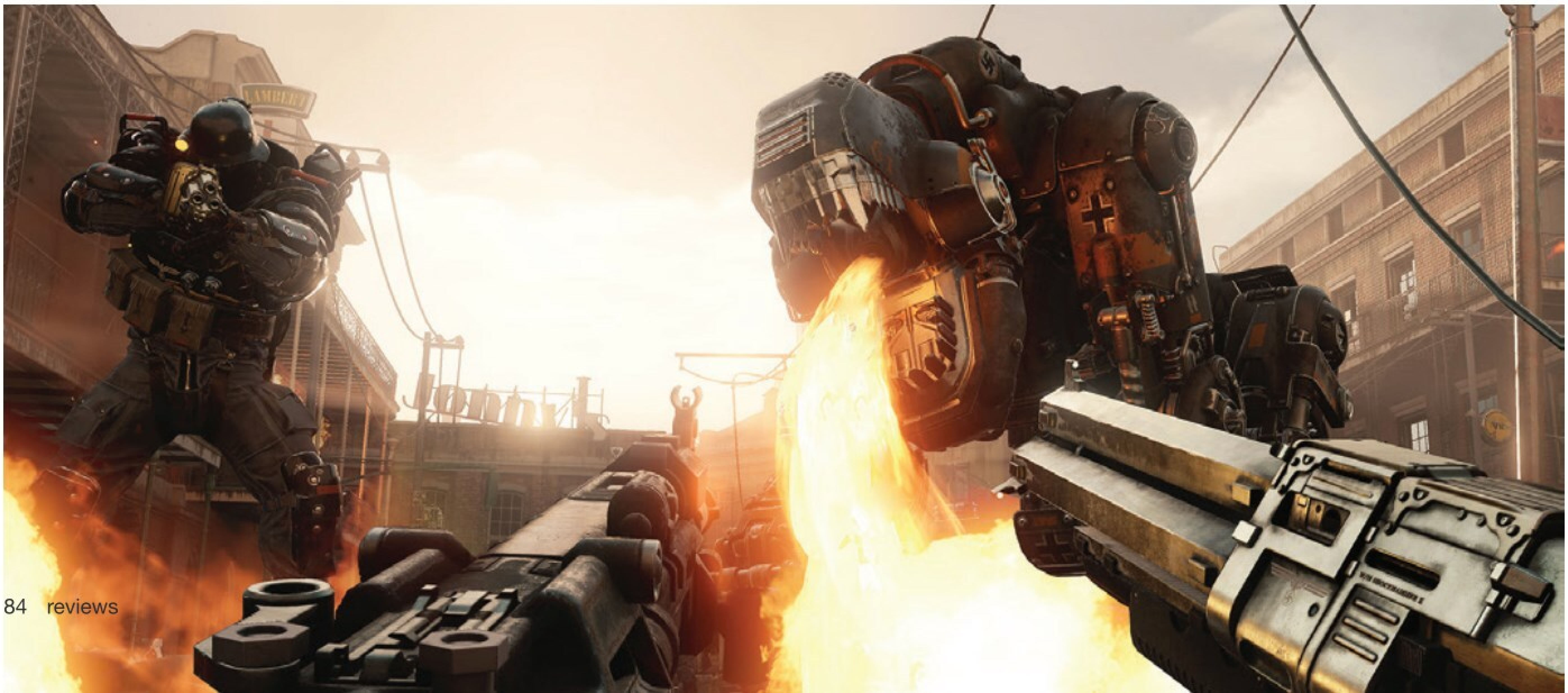
The New Colossus matches the variety of its settings with flexible action. The gunplay is satisfying, and all weapons have their own distinct personality and feel powerful. Both the perks system and the dual-wielding mechanic return, but they've been expanded. You are awarded more perks (like increasing the number of hatchets you carry) as you kill Nazis in creative ways. The dual-wielding mechanic now lets you use any two weapons. For example, I once cleared out an entire hallway with a shotgun in one hand and then picked off the enemies at the far end with a sniper rifle. I was impressed with how dual-wielding functioned as more than just an homage to '80s action movies, but also as something with tactical merit.

The biggest addition to the gunplay is the upgrade system. Weapon kits are scattered throughout all the levels with each one letting you access upgrades for every weapon in your arsenal. The system has no restriction, so you can put your kits toward putting silencers on guns or increasing rate of fire immediately. You also get to choose between three super powers, each of them with their own advantages. The wealth of upgrades are not only fun but give you surprising flexibility. The New Colossus is intense and adaptable no matter which playstyle you choose, putting it above the majority of other first-person shooters for me.

Wolfenstein II constantly finds ways to turn things up to 11, but that is only half of its magic. The New Order presented a memorable cast of characters, then gave them time to shine between missions as you roamed a hub world. The New Colossus has the same setup, with you and your crew aboard the U-boat that functions as your base, but also devotes more time to letting you spend time with your allies. Returning characters, such as pilot Fergus are made more interesting as they forge new relationships, and newcomers like Nazi turncoat Sigurn also leave a lasting impression with their arcs.

The New Colossus does not shy away from tough themes but instead doggedly pursues them. The 14-hour campaign tackles racism, executions, child abuse, despair, patricide, the holocaust, and terrorism. While these themes are dark, the game handles them well, giving a proper amount of drama and emotional depth to each. However, this parade of tragedy is never too much to bear, thanks to a fair share of wacky humor. You also see heartfelt moments of romance and friendship among the crew; amongst all the murder and sorrow, The New Colossus makes room for love and hope.

Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus is a bold game that rages and soars, deftly balancing pulp sci-fi with deadly seriousness, and one that should not be missed by anyone interested in the power of storytelling in video games.
» Javy Gwaltney



Assassin's Creed Origins

Keeping the faith by questioning it

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal **Release** October 27 **Rating** M

Though Assassin's Creed has experimented with tower defense, grappling hooks, and naval combat, it isn't always quick to evolve. Mission design, combat, and exploration evolve across entries, which dulls the impact of any one change. With an extra year of development to question what makes the franchise great, Assassin's Creed Origins implements sweeping changes in every department, reworking or cutting worn-out features and building new ones in their place. These changes come with growing pains, but result in one of the largest, most open-ended entries in the series.

Origins chronicles the foundation of the Assassins and their conflict with the Templars (called the Order of the Ancients) in Ptolemic-era Egypt. You take the role of Bayek, a military scout hunting down members of the Order who've killed his son. Bayek is a strong lead who isn't as playful as Ezio, but isn't a brooding hero like Connor. The villains tend to bleed into one another, however, and feel like stepping stones rather than enemies you can take pride in killing. The hunts themselves are satisfying, but not because your targets are developed well.

Bayek has no need to closely follow or eavesdrop on his targets, and so those mission types are gone. In their place are open-ended goals which involve rescuing, looting, or killing in whatever ways you can manage. Infiltrating a fortress at night, I was able to wipe out most of its guards in their sleep. I also unleashed a caged lion on an unsuspecting group of guards by firing an arrow at its cage. These encounters encourage creativity, and I loved not failing a mission unless I died in combat.

Dodging, blocking, and hitting opponents feels more active than the counter-based approach of past games. The basics are simple (break enemy shield stances with a heavy attack, dodge unblockable ones), but I enjoyed fighting enemies as a change of pace from sneaking around. Being seen doesn't mean having an entire battalion descend upon you as long as you can take out the offending guard quickly, which helps even the balance between sneaking and fighting.

As you explore Egypt and pick missions, raid encampments, and gather resources, you earn XP, which grants access to new weapons and lets you gain new abilities like holding two weapons or taming wild animals. Although the variety of swords, spears, scepters, and heavy weapons is rather small, these archetypes are fun to learn, and I received new gear often enough to experiment regularly. Rare gear layers on special attributes like healing or lighting everything it strikes on fire – which can mean Bayek himself if you're not careful.

The leveling system gives you goals to chase, but also comes with restrictions. Higher-level missions and enemies are frustrating to fight, so you may need to level up between missions. Areas are also cordoned off by level, which means your path through the world isn't as open as its size leads you to believe. You can speed up the leveling and upgrade curve by paying real money, but I never felt strained for resources or wanting for new weapons.

Climbing vantage points reveals various activities on the map, but Origins scales back the number of icons onscreen while giving you a much larger area to explore. Egypt is massive, and riding along its beautiful sandswept deserts, jagged cliffsides, and forested swamps is a joy, as is wandering ancient cityscapes like Alexandria. Most secrets are highlighted with question marks on the map and lead to substantive activities like raiding tombs (which involve a good mix of exploration and light puzzle-solving) or finding stone circles (which unlock meaningful flashback conversations between Bayek and his son). This gives scouring the map a sense of discovery that, along with the beautiful landscapes, made me more eager to explore the world.

As much as Origins improves the world inside the Animus, it struggles to provide a meaningful reason to venture outside of it. Origins attempts to bring the present-day storyline back into the spotlight, but doesn't succeed. Although you control a character who can move around a small area, the short, self-contained story doesn't offer enough insight to shake the question of why I had been kicked out of the Animus at all.

Origins doesn't completely rebuild Assassin's Creed, but makes a number of smart, significant changes to a formula that, despite yearly updates, was showing its age. The increased freedom in how you approach targets, the more active combat, and alluring map not only make exploring Egypt a rewarding experience, but also offer a strong direction for the series going forward while still remembering what made it unique in the first place.

» **Suriel Vazquez**

This review pertains to the Xbox One version of the game, running on an Xbox One X. The game is also available on PS4 and PC

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Revamp the most outdated aspects of Assassin's Creed while introducing the series' most sprawling, beautiful locale yet

» **Graphics**
Egypt's deserts, canyons, and oasis towns look gorgeous. Some framerate slowdowns occur during cutscenes, however, as well as a few hitches lasting for as long as three seconds

» **Sound**
The sound design is as sharp as ever, from the sword clangs of combat to the bustling cities

» **Playability**
Combat and stealth see some welcome improvements, and the larger world serves the series' sense of exploration well

» **Entertainment**
Expanded progression, open-world freedom, and a fascinating backdrop make for an enticing origin story

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The Evil Within 2

A diluted concoction

7.75

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Tango Gameworks **Release** October 13 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Expand the scope of this horror series by moving outside the shadow of Resident Evil

» Graphics
Character models look great and express well, even if the performances are a bit hammy. The larger environments have a great mix of distant vistas and intricate, detailed interiors

» Sound
An orchestral score amplifies moments when it needs to, but the crunchy pop of a headshot or guttural noise of a nearby enemy are more distinctive and memorable

» Playability
The control layout is quirky, but it works. Unless you invest in upgrading your aim, simply firing and landing shots on enemies can be frustrating

» Entertainment
The Evil Within 2 offers some enjoyable scares, but it never transcends or deviates from the many works it draws from

» Replay Value
Moderate

Ignoring the influence of Resident Evil 4 on The Evil Within is impossible; survival-horror pioneer Shinji Mikami and developer Tango Gameworks iterated on the former's combat, structure, and progression while upping the sense of scale and adding a few twists. If the first entry worshipped at the altar of Resident Evil 4, then The Evil Within 2 is polytheistic, borrowing more from several other games to introduce new scares into its mix. Though it finds a successful middle ground between horror and shooter, it doesn't elevate itself above its inspirations, which makes for an enjoyable (if not unique) trek through a demented world.

Three years after the events of The Evil Within, Sebastian Castellanos is traumatized by his journey into STEM, a nightmare-inducing device that amalgamates the consciousness of everyone who enters it. During a late-night bender at a bar, he's told his deceased wife and daughter are still alive, but he has to dive back into STEM to save them. The plot has its moments as reality becomes upended and characters grapple with the idea that they may not make it out of STEM alive. Events are easier to follow this time around, though, as in many horror films, you can see when logic goes out the window in favor of creating specific scenarios.

During the first few hours, sneaking is almost mandatory, since combat is brutally difficult. Enemies behave erratically and are quick enough to keep up, so you eventually need to start fighting back. When you decide to expend your precious ammo, the shooting feels sluggish and unwieldy until you spend resources to steady your aim. Horror purists might say that's key to building the tension the genre relies on, but lining up a headshot only to watch my bullet whizz by an enemy because I hadn't accounted for where Sebastian's trembling hands would sway isn't tense – it's aggravating.

The Evil Within 2 doesn't make a turn from horror to action until much later, and I enjoyed the prolonged tension of thinking about my ammo and health in the long term. I cursed the loss of every wasted bullet, but I appreciate that my actions carried weight, and that I was rewarded for taking my time and playing deliberately. Only in the last few hours did I feel I could handle whatever twisted monster the game would throw at me next, and I felt like I had earned that feeling. As it focuses more on barreling through bespoke encounters instead of wading through large expanses, The Evil Within 2 goes from plodding to intense. However, even as the combat and stealth became more satisfying and the speed picked up, I never escaped the nagging feeling I was going through the motions instead of wondering what new environment or twist I'd see next.

Although most of your time includes running from one narrow corridor to the next, The Evil Within 2 also has expansive, hub-like areas littered with enemies, supplies, and a few side quests. Although the side quests are worth tackling (one quest that initially felt like a drain led to a consistent source of supplies) you're more likely to lose resources early on as enemies decimate you in groups. These sandbox areas are a bold step to expand the scope of the series but feel less focused, since sneaking by the same enemies multiple times between objectives damages the momentum.

The open-ended segments funnel into tighter, more curated levels, which feature a surprising amount of visual variety. Although most of this includes horror staples like abandoned mansions, dungeons, and various kinds of facilities, you get a few refreshing and impressive worlds with a more surreal flair. You never stay in one of these spaces for long, which helps stave off the sense that this is your hundredth time through a spooky underground laboratory.

These linear segments are also where you see the most homages to other games, such as a chapter dedicated to exploring the psyche of a murderous artist similar to BioShock's Sander Cohen, or an otherworldly stealth sequence reminiscent of Batman: Arkham Asylum's Scarecrow levels. These segments are well-executed, but they feel more like rip-offs than homages. Most of the boss fights are similarly run-of-the-mill, never eliciting fear or forcing you to devise unique tactics. Seeing a group of regular enemies scared me more than meeting a boss.

The Evil Within 2 is a solid horror game that expands the scope of the series to extend out of the shadow of a titan in the horror genre, even if it sometimes leans heavily on borrowed ideas. Its progression and difficulty curve create a satisfying loop that repays resourcefulness and strategy, but its set pieces and structure don't build enough on the many ideas they borrow to make them feel new or interesting. The result is a ride that offers some fun thrills in the moment, but I don't think I'll lose too much sleep over these particular nightmares.

» **Suriel Vazquez**

Total War: Warhammer II

Rapacious rats and disorderly dinosaurs

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Strategy (8-player Online) **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Creative Assembly **Release** September 28 **Rating** T

8.75

PC

» **Concept**
Conquer real-time, turn-based battles with gobs of exotic fantasy units from the Warhammer universe

» **Graphics**
Zoom in and around battlefields to highlight each unit in detail, putting you right into the fantasy

» **Sound**
The voices and sounds of the battle inject life into bold new races like sneaky Skaven and boisterous lizards

» **Playability**
Clearly aimed at hardcore strategy fans, the title has many systems and mechanics that take some time to get used to. Advisors and tutorial-style fare offer essential assistance

» **Entertainment**
The pairing of Warhammer and Total War continues to be a refreshing and on-point marriage of both franchises

» **Replay Value**
High

The original Total War: Warhammer proved high fantasy was an explosive ingredient to add to Creative Assembly's longstanding strategy franchise. The Warhammer property has been used in all manner of games, with plenty of misses to go along with the hits, but it finds a perfect pairing here, adding flying units and magic without sacrificing the tactical core gameplay. With Total War: Warhammer II, the series proves itself yet again with a more coherent campaign and exotic races that shake up gameplay on and off the battlefield.

The campaign is more focused than the original title, with everything revolving around the Great Vortex. The faction claims it has ultimate power within its grasp, but getting there is another story. As is the standard for Total War, half the game is played on an overworld map where you capture territory in turn-based strategy, develop strongholds, bolster your economy, and put together armies. The other half takes place on the battlefield in real time, where you smash hordes of units against enemy forces, cast epic spells to turn the tide of combat, and command your massive units to lumber into the thick of the melee. These giant campaigns can get bogged down in the late game when so many forces are in play, but Creative Assembly seems to have done a decent job alleviating some – but not all – of that endgame monotony.

How you choose to rise to power hinges on the four new playable races: High Elves, Dark Elves, Skaven, and Lizardmen. These are the biggest new additions, and the strongest reasons to pick up and play Total War: Warhammer II over its predecessor. Each race feels notably different; I instantly gravitated toward the sneaky Skaven, who hide their holdings underground. Their overworld settlement presence is masked by what appear to be ruins, so your foes never know what they're walking into. The Skaven spread their disgusting corruption all over the land and must keep careful watch on their food stores. Corruption is a twisted double-edged sword, a weaponized form of unrest. While corruption may result in uprisings in your lands, it spreads across the world and can cause serious problems for other players – you're more prepared for it as a squabbling Skaven. Mechanics and features like this that play into the Warhammer fantasy are executed well in fun, functional flavor.

While the other races are also enjoyable with their own special features, like High Elves' ability to exert influence on relations between factions (turn your enemies against each other!), and the Lizardmen's dinosaurs that fly into an uncontrollable rage. Nothing quite matches the spectacle of watching a Stegadon go completely insane in the middle of an opposing army – just make sure your own troops are far away when it happens. Each race almost feels like its own separate game, as the experiences are so disparate, and that alone justifies this sequel in lieu of a traditional expansion.

If you're not in the mood for the campaign, preloaded quest battles are also available, complete with full rosters of ready-to-go units. These are a great way to get a taste for the feel of battle before setting off into the investment of campaign, and they let you play around with each race's key units.

Warhammer's long legacy in gaming has found a perfect partner in Total War. If you're a fan of strategy games, chaotic rat-men, or rampaging dinosaurs, this isn't one to miss. » **Daniel Tack**

Manage your powerful mounted lords in combat

Gran Turismo Sport

A compromising vision

7.75

PS4

» Concept
Create an online-focused title that still tries to be true to its Gran Turismo roots through its driving and an olive branch of a single-player campaign

» Graphics
The game does not have dynamic weather or time, but tracks offer a variety of times of day and cloud cover which all look gorgeous. Elsewhere, I urge you to create custom photos in Scapes. Even the most mundane composition looks stunning

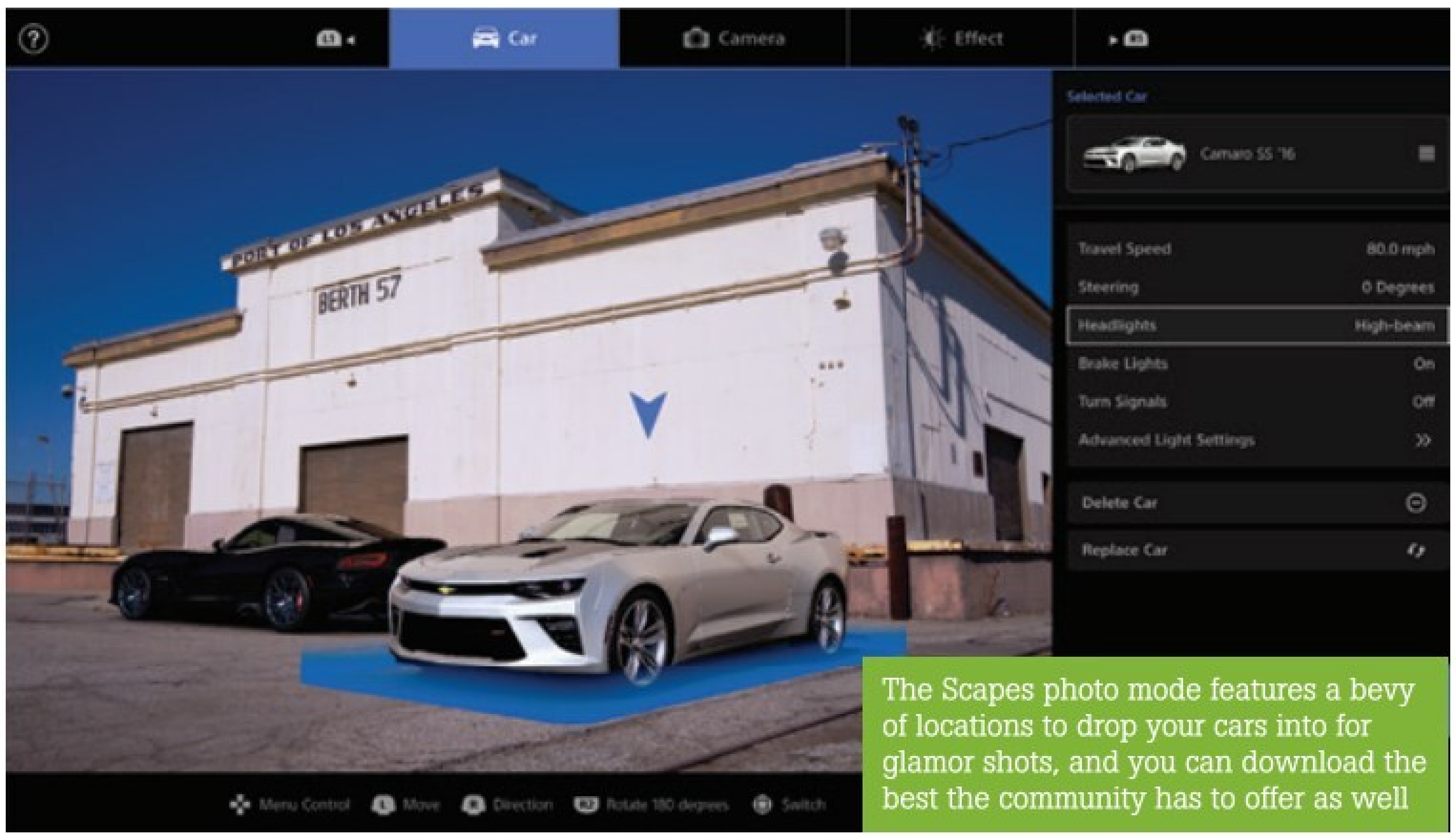
» Sound
I really like the different sounds of the cars, and a car game creating that kind of interest after hours of playing is a feat

» Playability
The contextual collision rules make a big difference in making online races more enjoyable

» Entertainment
The online racing is very engaging if you can put up with the game's overall structure

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Style 1 or 2-Player Racing (24-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Polyphony Digital **Release** October 17 **Rating** E



Travel Speed 80.0 mph
Steering 0 Degrees
Headlights High-beam
Brake Lights On
Turn Signals Off
Advanced Light Settings »
Delete Car
Replace Car

The Scapes photo mode features a bevy of locations to drop your cars into for glamor shots, and you can download the best the community has to offer as well

Gran Turismo developer Polyphony Digital has slowly developed the series' online component through the years, but now it's focusing on online play. GT Sport goes beyond the predominantly single-player past of its numbered installments, but doesn't go so far as to carve out an entirely new identity. The game uneasily tries to straddle these two poles, but thankfully the excellence of the driving is a comforting totem amidst some of the confusing structural choices.

The titular online mode isn't just about racing against other real-life opponents (the online lobbies are suited for that kind of free-for-all), it funnels players into specific competitions. Daily races are preset by Polyphony and they open up at specific times through the hour. This focuses the community, but the fact that these "daily" races are only being changed weekly means I soon tired of putting down qualifying times and challenging for a podium finish on the same three tracks. The marquee FIA GT Nations Cup, Manufacturers Series, and Polyphony Digital Championship competitions are all similarly time-gated, creating further choke points, and the online-only save structure – no matter what mode you're in – is also a hurdle. It auto-saves at intervals, but progress can be lost if there's a blip in the interim.

I like GT Sport's solemn attempt at a sense of occasion and propriety – even the earnestness of the etiquette rating that rewards you for not running into people. I feel the satisfaction of racing the right way. This isn't conveyed through the reckless driving penalties, which can be levied unfathomably, but by the cars themselves. The racing demands an understanding of the limitations and strengths of the cars, from the lateral stiffness of a low-end car to trying to harness the horsepower and braking prowess of a better one. I smugly enjoyed taking a corner crisply and thereby passing a faster car in lesser hands. Overall, the fact that car collision is disabled when someone re-enters from off the track or spins out of control thankfully prevents all hell from breaking loose during online races. In another concession, even shots from behind don't automatically send you careening.

Cars, credits, and various rewards like decals and arcade mode track unlocks flow easily, and cars can be tuned and upgraded (through a simplified system, since you don't buy parts), allowing them to compete across different performance categories. Your garage is useful as you get a feel for which ones you like on which track, but this endearment is stunted by the limited single-player campaign mode.

FUSO
FUSO TRUCKS AND BUSES

The game's contextual collision system makes situations like this a lot less hairy or frustrating

Putting aside the usual driving school lessons and the track tutorials in the Circuit Experience section, GT Sports' campaign mode largely consists of 64 mission challenges ranging from overtake tests to full-on races. The mode is admirable and nets you credits and various rewards, but it doesn't offer the cohesive journey of a normal career mode containing series of multi-race championships (which I acknowledge could also be done better in the other Gran Turismos). Instead, it's a series of disparate, smaller tasks often involving loaner cars. GT Sport is an online-focused title for sure, but a side effect of the campaign mode as it stands is that it lessens the emotional investment in your garage cars.

Finally, the entire game suffers from too few tracks and no dynamic weather to go along with them (currently rain is only on a later mission challenge). No matter the mode, you churn through the likes of Brands Hatch and Suzuka more times than desirable, and I don't know why Polyphony elected to use multiple ovals/near-ovals when they bring little to the table and there are other, more attractive real-world tracks out there.

Regardless of its foibles, let this installment be the start of a real commitment by Polyphony Digital to online racing – one that is folded into the main series' career mode and which is not just a dabble like the track creator of GT 5 or the dynamic time/weather and race clubs of GT 6. GT Sport has enough qualities that it should be the start of something better and not just a detour for the franchise. » **Matthew Kato**

STICK TOGETHER
SPLIT UP

Hidden Agenda

A scaled-back psychological thriller

Style 1 to 6-Player Adventure **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Supermassive Games **Release** October 24 **Rating** M

8

PS4

» Concept
Shape the narrative of a whodunnit thriller with simple QTEs and difficult choices, all in a single sitting

» Graphics
Hidden Agenda lacks the same impeccable polish of Until Dawn, which lands many of the characters in the uncanny valley

» Sound
Some voice actors are better than others, but the performances are solid in general

» Playability
A slight delay between your smartphone and onscreen cursor can be a bit frustrating during some of the faster QTEs. Otherwise the interface works surprisingly well

» Entertainment
Hidden Agenda doesn't live up to Supermassive's interactive take on the teen slasher genre, but still weaves a suspenseful mystery worth more than one playthrough

» Replay Value
Moderate

Until Dawn is an exciting anomaly in the adventure game genre, bolstering the choose-your-own-adventure formula with triple-A production values and truly meaningful choices that go above and beyond the offerings of its peers. For its follow-up, Supermassive scales back and streamlines the experience, offering a tense whodunnit mystery that is meant to be completed in a single sitting. As a result, Hidden Agenda doesn't pack the same punch as its predecessor, but offers interesting innovations and thrills along its malleable narrative.

Hidden Agenda follows the efforts of homicide detective Rebecca Marney (and a few colleagues) to track down and apprehend The Trapper, a serial killer with a penchant for rigging victims with deadly boobytraps. Like Until Dawn, players shape Marney's investigation via difficult choices and quick-time events, the results of which ripple throughout the branching narrative. Unlike Until Dawn, however, Supermassive has distilled the experience down to just the storytelling. You don't directly control characters or explore environments at your leisure. In fact, you won't even touch your controller after the game begins.

All of your interactions – and those of up to five friends – are handled via Hidden Agenda's free companion app. The simple interface allows you to manipulate your own individual cursor on the television screen by dragging a finger across your phone screen to answer questions, activate timed events, and search for hidden objects at predesignated moments. The app also offers up information such as character bios and decision recaps as the story progresses. The system works surprisingly well, and provides a satisfying amount of agency over the story – provided your phone battery can handle it; I had to plug mine in well before the credits rolled.

I don't want to spoil any of Hidden Agenda's plot twists, but I was impressed with how differently my playthroughs turned out. My first one was abysmal: The killer went free, innocent characters died, and Marney ended up in hot water. Avoiding the same mistakes in my second playthrough led to entirely new scenes and opportunities; not only did I save the day, but I ended up with a better understanding of the killer's background and motive thanks to clues I missed in my first attempt.

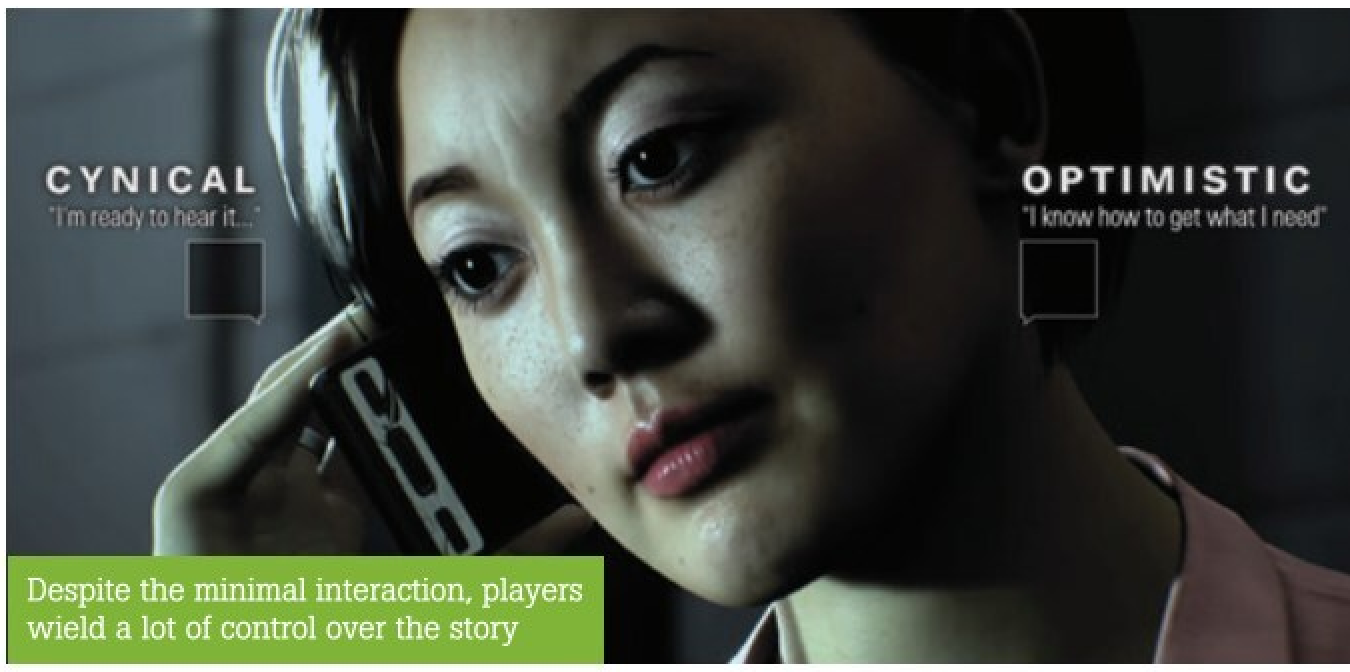
Unlike the head-lopping antics of Until Dawn, many of Hidden Agenda's choices focus more on character relationships than deadly action, though lives are occasionally still on the line. Who you trust (and who trusts you) has a major impact on the ending, as simply identifying the Trapper isn't enough – you also have to build a case against the killer. While Hidden Agenda's narrative ultimately isn't all that grandiose or complex (and my knee-jerk assumption of who the killer was proved correct), I enjoyed the steady string of minor revelations and risky options I was forced to choose between.

Unfortunately, the competitive mode – which periodically gives players their own hidden agendas to complete without getting caught – doesn't fare as well. Because the secret objectives are just randomly pulled from the regular story choices, they feel arbitrary and pointless, like having Marney share her feelings with her captain during an innocuous conversation. They also slow down the pace and detract from the plot players are trying to shape, so groups are far better off sticking to the cooperative story mode.

After multiple playthroughs, I still have mixed feelings about Hidden Agenda's length, which clocks in around two hours. On one hand, I appreciate being able to play through the story in a single sitting. This is downright vital when playing with friends, since no one wants to come over to sit through half a mystery. However, the short runtime fundamentally limits your investment in the characters and world. The inability to return to checkpoints or skip cutscenes on repeat playthroughs also hurts; I would love to see how one or two key decisions might affect the outcome, but not enough to play through the entire story yet again.

Despite being more focused, Hidden Agenda suffers from more technical hiccups than its predecessor. Some characters look unnatural and downright creepy, and the branching story leads to some rocky transitions in conversations.

As someone who has grown increasingly wary of the rote formula most modern adventure games cling to, Hidden Agenda is another fresh and worthwhile experience from Supermassive. It may not have the same impact or polish as its predecessor, but it provides an evening of solid entertainment and a great alternative to the standard choose-your-own-adventure fare. **» Jeff Marchiafava**



Despite the minimal interaction, players wield a lot of control over the story

Forza Motorsport 7

Restrictor plated

7.75

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
The series marches forward with more cars and tracks, but the system around them is as convoluted as ever

» **Graphics**
Different weather and times of day are set to the tracks, but the game still looks gorgeous

» **Sound**
Racers like Ken Block, Porsche factory driver Pat Long, and IndyCar series champion Josef Newgarden star in voiceovers

» **Playability**
Once again the driving feels great, and cars of all classes are fun to drive

» **Entertainment**
It's great to get behind the wheel in Forza, but the rest of the game's structure gets in the way

» **Replay Value**
High

Style 1 or 2-Player Racing (24-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Turn 10 Studios **Release** October 3 **Rating** E

The first few hours of Forza are intoxicating as credits are stuffed into your hand, the upgrade possibilities are seemingly endless, and each race takes you one step closer to...something. Get settled in, however, and the fussy structure and changes from previous Forzas become irksome as they limit what you can do with the cars in your garage in favor of continually pushing you to purchase new ones. Which is a shame, because once again the on-track experience is great.

Forza 7's Forza Driver's Cup single-player campaign is organized into six championships that contain multiple divisions or racing series. The majority of these series contain a string of races, with each contributing to your overall place in the division. Finishing enough divisions unlocks the next championship (like Forza 6 it's linear). Doing well each step of the way gets you credits and increases your driver level, which unlocks driving suits, credits, or cars. The game also layers on mods that can increase your credit output; a car-collection rating that opens up new cars to buy, and which also earns you credits; and prize crates you can purchase that contain a random assortment of driver gear, mods, icon badges for your drivatar – and possibly a car.

At first I was just happy to progress my driver level, win a few cars, and feel financially secure. But the more I progressed the more restricted I felt in what I could do with my cars. It's not like the old days, where you have to grind and re-race a very limited number of races to continue. Instead, cars are restricted by the division they can race in, and each car can only race in one division. Upgrades can be bought, but the car itself can only be augmented within the division restrictions and not upgraded or raced in other classes. Thus, your ability to upgrade your car is limited unless you want to race it outside of your career in free play.

This makes cars disposable, since they are only eligible for their designated division and a handful of open-class races (as long as they aren't upgraded past their class). They can be taken online and raced against cars of a similar level (a process called homologation) via Turn 10's strictly defined multiplayer lobbies called hoppers, but that requires the developer to have created a hopper that accommodates your car. At the time of this writing in the first week of the game, there were six hoppers created, and out of the 30 cars in my garage, only four could race in multiplayer. Cars can be rented, but you don't get XP or credits for races, and there is still no way for players to create public lobbies, only private ones.

Not only are cars disposable, but the credits to buy them, while seemingly free-flowing, are restricted as well. The mod system introduced last year boosts the credits you can earn per race, but mods are now limited in use and can only be found in random prize crates, which themselves cost credits. Turn 10 says that after launch real-money can be paid for tokens that work like in-game credits, which, in conjunction with the need to own lots of cars due to the division restrictions and other parameters outlined above, puts pressure on you to spend real money and/or grind to get the cars you want.

This isn't shockingly evil, but it's not how things were done in past Forza games. It reinforces the feeling that Forza 7 is about jumping through credit-draining hoops and navigating structural detours instead of getting out of players' way. I don't have to buy prize crates for mods (I'm certainly not buying them for the driver jumpsuits), but then I'm not making as many credits per race. I'd like to upgrade my favorite cars and become attached to them because I can race them in more divisions and classes, but that's not possible. Even if I wanted my garage to be more about quantity over quality I'm even gated from buying cars through a collection tier system that only unlocks faster depending on how many cars you've already bought.

Sadly, all this distracts from how great Forza is on the track, how good the trigger vibration feels when you test out a car's limits, and how gorgeous the dynamic weather is when it starts to rain and when racing at night. Unfortunately, Forza 7 finds itself in a similar position as Forza 6 – a title that performs well on the track, but disappoints off of it. This many iterations in the franchise's life, I wish we still weren't waiting for its best version or missing features from previous entries. However, this is the road we're on. » **Matthew Kato**

Cuphead

A tempest in a teacup

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Studio MDHR **Developer** Studio MDHR **Release** September 29 **Rating** E

8

Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Take on a host of cleverly designed, deviously difficult bosses in a gorgeously animated action/platformer

» Graphics
The presentation is absolutely stunning, with lovingly hand-drawn animations that would be right at home in the best (and weirdest) cartoons from the '20s and '30s

» Sound
The audio is an appropriate throwback to the retro visuals, with ragtime piano, Dixieland jazz, and other tunes that will make you want to crank up your gramophone

» Playability
Cuphead is tough, and it asks a lot from the player. Thankfully, the precise controls and visual feedback are up to the task

» Entertainment
Cuphead's friendly exterior masks a game that denies all but the most persistent players its many rewards. Those who stick with it will have a great (and frustrating) time

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Cuphead made me shout obscenities at a flower. Its cheerful dragon tempted me to head-butt my television. And the candy princess? Oh, you don't even want to know. I didn't appreciate it until much later, but those early maddening hours with Studio MDHR's run-and-gun platformer were like a kiln, hardening my skills and turning me into the best damned Cuphead player that I could be. That trial by fire is ultimately one of the most satisfying parts of the overall experience, but players who just want to enjoy its unique aesthetic are going to get burned.

The hand-drawn animation is mesmerizing, and makes for one of the most visually appealing games I've played in years. Studio MDHR faithfully recreated nearly every facet of classic animation from the '20s and '30s, from the title cards that introduce each stage to the jazzy score that accompanies the action. If you have any fondness for that era, you're in good hands. Going into the game, I wondered if there would be certain homages to long-lost techniques, and, without spoiling some of the most satisfying little moments of the game, the answer is "Yep!" The attention to detail is wonderful, and I was immediately pulled into its scratchy Technicolor world. But once I got there, I was in for a surprise.

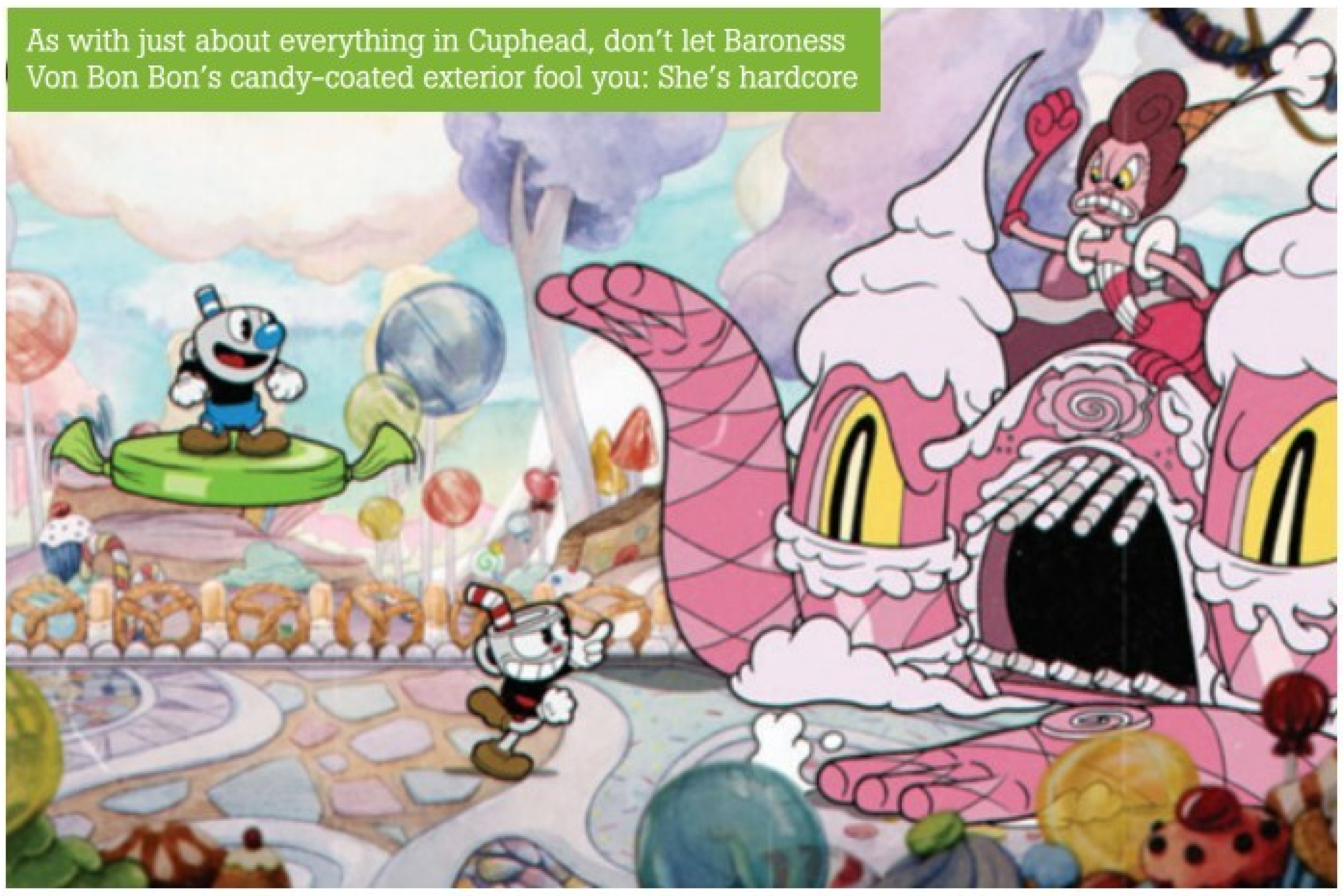
Cuphead may lure you close like the visible aroma from a cartoon pie, but its difficulty is the windowsill slamming shut on your hands. Studio MDHR was inspired not only by classic animation, but by tough arcade games that fed off a steady diet of quarters. The bulk of Cuphead is built around boss battles, each of which has several different phases. They can be knocked out in a couple of minutes, but that assumes you've mastered the various tricks each one requires. You have unlimited continues, but no checkpoints or shortcuts through the encounters. When you fail – and you will fail – you have to fight that boss from its opening moments again. This approach walks the razor-thin balance beam between being frustrating and rewarding, and it mostly succeeds. About half the time I finally landed the final blow on a boss, I'd cheer. The other times, I'd flip it the bird with both hands. You can play simplified versions of the boss fights, but you won't get to see many of the game's best moments. You also need to beat them on the regular difficulty if you want to fight the last pair of bosses. Trust me, it's worth it.

Compared to the intense boss encounters, the run-and-gun action levels feel uninspired, full of straight-foward enemy gauntlets and platforming challenges. These sections aren't nearly as interesting as the rest of the game, and include some of Cuphead's worst moments, such as a poorly implemented gravity-swapping section and a few fatal end-of-stage surprises that feel more like active trolling. Unfortunately, they're the main source of gold coins, which you need to buy additional weapons and special abilities. Fortunately, these levels aren't numerous, and you never have to revisit them once you get all the coins.

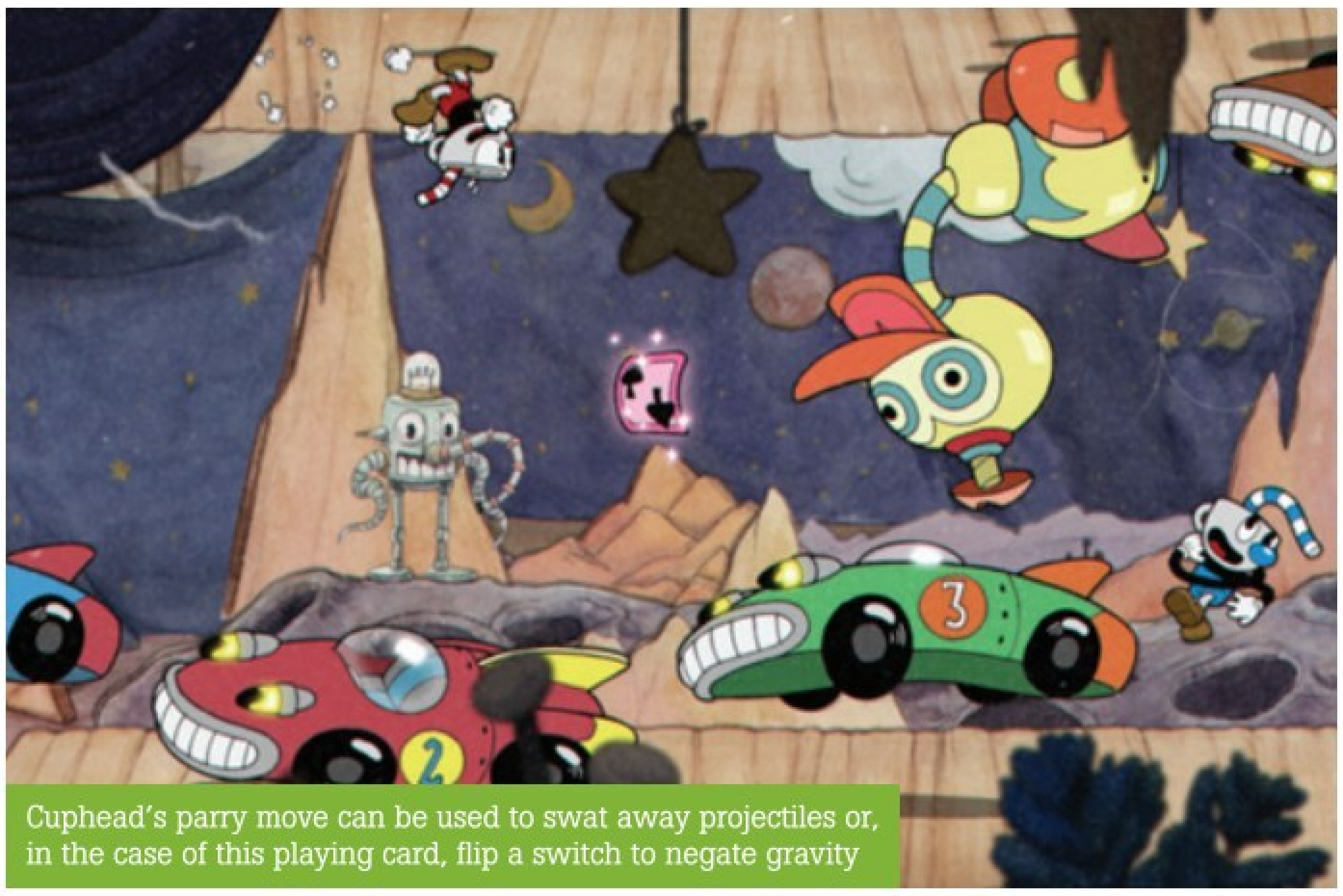
Those weapons and abilities add a welcome wrinkle to Cuphead. You can equip two weapon types, one of three ultimate attacks, and a special charm. At first, I gravitated toward abilities that gave me additional health. Then I got better at the game and found that I wasn't getting hit nearly as often. At that point, I switched to a power that let me avoid damage by dashing, and that changed everything. The arsenal is small but diverse, and part of the fun is finding a loadout that works best for you. On several occasions, when I thought a boss was impossible, I breezed through it after picking the right tools. Getting good at the parry ability, which allows you to slap away pink projectiles, is also important.

When I got stuck, I enlisted help through local co-op. By bringing along a buddy (who plays as Cuphead's friend, Mugman), you can revive your comrade if you manage to parry their ghost before it floats to the top of the screen. I thought this would be overpowered, but it comes with a tradeoff: Sharing space with another character can be distracting, especially when you need to watch out for subtle tells that the bosses have before attacking. I got through some tricky stages thanks to co-op, but I managed to beat the rest of it solo, so assistance isn't a requirement.

Cuphead is a singular experience. Studio MDHR knew what it wanted to make, then went ahead and made it. A tough boss-rush game based on classic animation archetypes? It shouldn't work, but here we are. It's fun to play, and possibly even as satisfying to watch, since you can fully absorb what's going on screen. It would have been easy to dial down the overall difficulty (and I wouldn't have complained), but that wouldn't have been Cuphead, either. Stick with it, is all I can say. We don't often get something that will make you laugh and grind your teeth in such close proximity. » **Jeff Cork**



As with just about everything in Cuphead, don't let Baroness Von Bon Bon's candy-coated exterior fool you: She's hardcore



Cuphead's parry move can be used to swat away projectiles or, in the case of this playing card, flip a switch to negate gravity

Golf Story

Nothing short of charming

9

Switch

» Concept
Become the greatest golfer alive as you battle zombies and gators just as much as you practice your hook and slice

» Graphics
The colorful 16-bit aesthetic captures the true absurdity of both the golfing and characters. While characters rarely move, their emotions are beautifully captured in animated word balloons

» Sound
Each world brings a different type of music, from a soothing saxophone to mood-setting synth. The entire score is quite good

» Playability
The three-click swing mechanic is easy to master, yet the challenges often require pinpoint placement and well-thought-out approaches. Putting doesn't offer much strategy at all, and almost comes across as an afterthought

» Entertainment
Lives up to its name, succeeding both as a riveting golf experience and a narrative that sinks its hooks into you

» Replay Value
Moderate

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Role-Playing/Sports **Publisher** Sidebar Games **Developer** Sidebar Games **Release** September 28 **Rating** E

Golf Story is a refreshing and unique role-playing experience that succeeds as a golf game and story. Spending quality time with dear old dad on the links as a child ends up being a passion that consumes your character 20 years later, so much so that you part ways with your significant other for one last shot at becoming a golf star. This surprisingly heavy narrative moment is the only part of Golf Story that isn't wacky, fun, or flat-out insane. Everything that happens next is upbeat and strange – even the sinister doings of a money-hungry golf course owner made me smile. This is where Golf Story hits a hole-in-one; it doesn't take itself seriously, yet still delivers a meaningful story that is a joy to watch unfold.

With a golf bag fastened to your back, you travel to Wellworn Grove, the place where dad taught you how to play. Time has not been kind to this course. Weeds are sprouting up, giant molerats and cheekybeak birds infest each hole, and the golfers in training are more likely to hit the parking lot than a green. Despite the *Caddyshack*-like atmosphere that hangs over Wellworn, you intend to turn heads with your skills, and hopefully draw the attention of a coach. This "mission" immediately shows how much variety Golf Story offers, as you are tasked to complete smaller activities to earn enough cash for one lesson.

The entire area is open for exploration. As you move from hole to hole, you find people in need of help, or who are cocky enough to challenge you to a competition. These tasks range from seeing who can tee off the furthest to chipping out of the rough – brief golf exercises that bring you up to speed on the Golf Story's excellent mechanics.

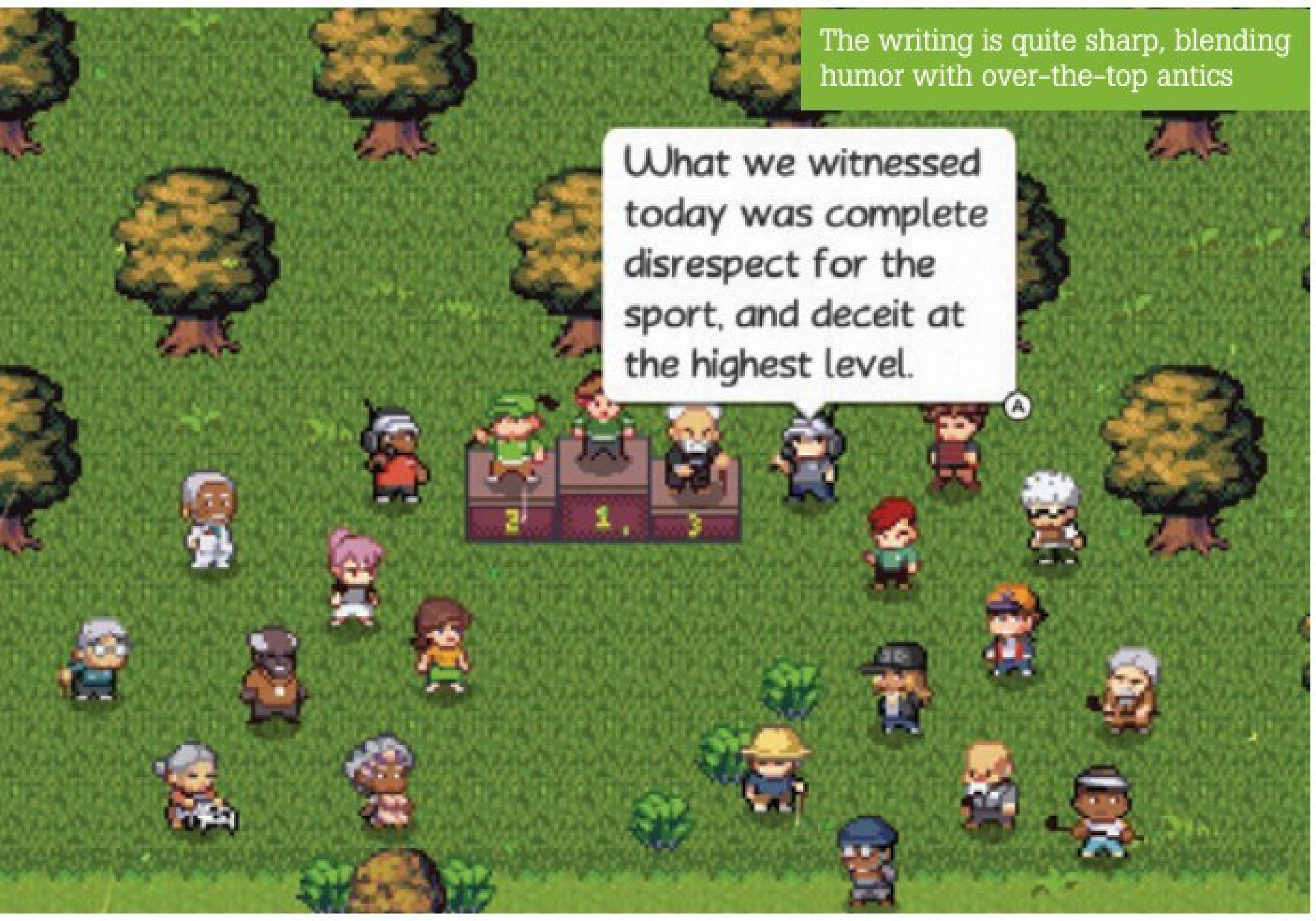
Much like Mario Golf, all shots are handled with a simple three-click swing meter. It's so easy to use that you are likely to hit perfect shots most of the time. As empowering as it is to continually feel like you're a great golfer, perfection doesn't always lead to success; the course often fights back against you. Hit it in the vicinity of a molerat, and it moves your ball to the nearest sand trap. Skill comes into play by threading the needle or making miraculous shots past the hazards. Wind becomes an issue as you progress through the game, forcing you to change the strike point on the ball to have it fly higher or wrap around an obstacle. Putting is a weak point in Golf Story, offering no real read on the terrain – and most greens are so small that you don't need much skill at all.

The meat of the Golf Story experience is divided into story missions and actual nine-hole golf competitions across eight different courses. The missions range from helping an archeologist dig up lost treasures (a feat of digging performed using a sand wedge) to waging war against the molerats, only to find these vermin are a part of an undead uprising. Most of the activities are fun and odd, tapping the basic golf gameplay in a variety of ways, such as driving to hit chicken wings into a lake where blood gators lie in wait. You also veer outside of stroke play to compete in disc golf and foot races. I enjoyed most of the activities, which deftly blend challenge with charm.

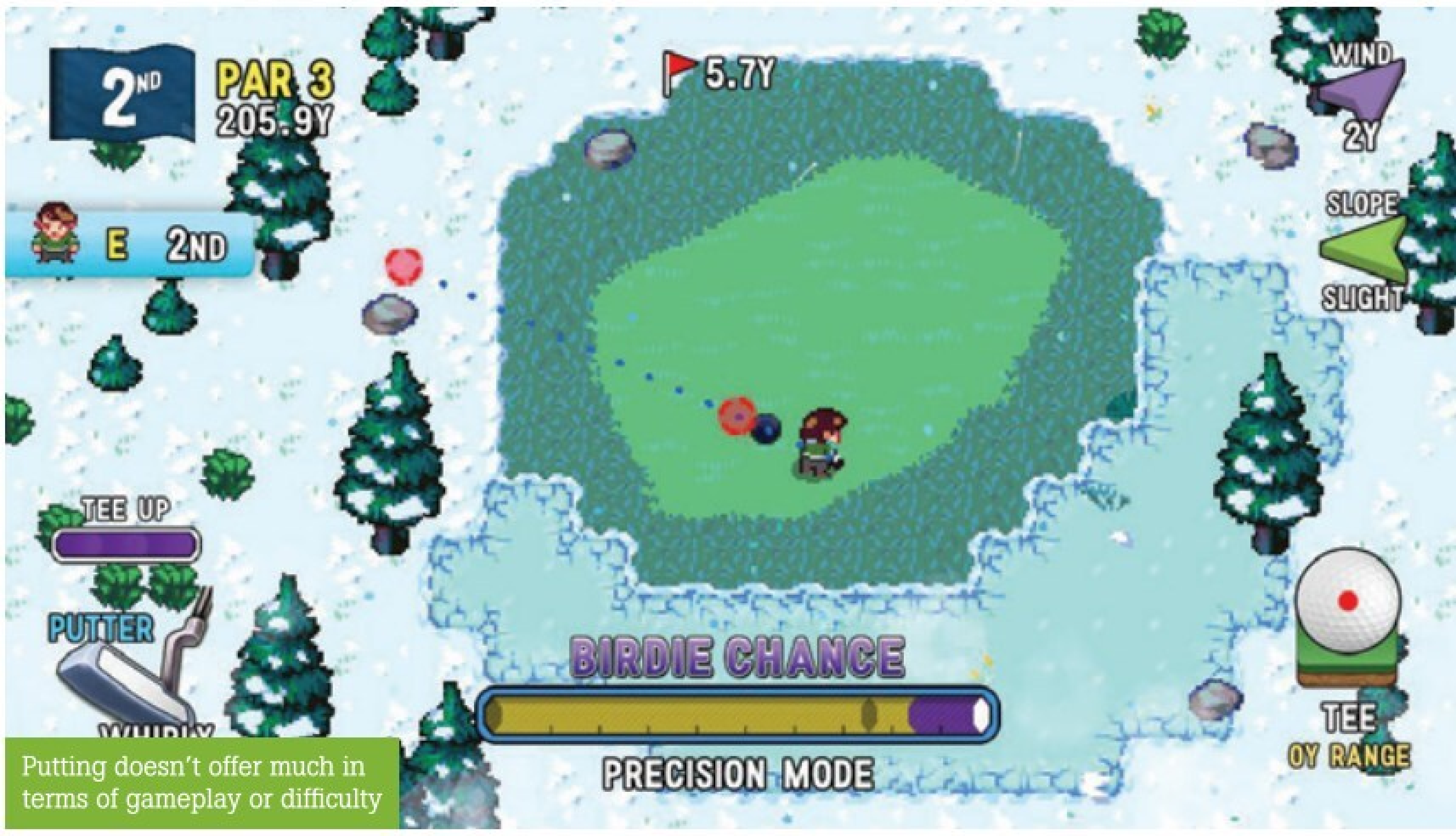
The only section of the game that is a little long in the tooth is the extensive trading quest in Bermuda Isles. This content has some humor to it, but is mainly busywork divorced from golfing: You just fetch an item and find out who needs it. Thankfully, the game rights itself after this, and once again dazzles by blending weird things (like using open graves as holes) with legitimate, skill-based tournaments.

Everything you do in the game rewards you with money and experience points. Money buys new clubs, whereas experience improves your skills, such as driving and striking. These perks give you incentives to venture off of the critical path to take on amusing side activities. This is time well spent too, as the side stories and bonus objectives are just as engaging as the main story arc. I don't want to spoil where this narrative goes, but you get to know the key characters well as they become your friends and enemies. The writing is good, and emotions are accented nicely through animated word bubbles and changing font sizes. Lara, a pink-haired rival who is jealous of your skills, is almost always funny, and is one of the more enjoyable characters I've encountered this year.

Yes, it's just a golf game at its core, but Golf Story makes you care about the characters and their world just as much as sinking a do-or-die putt. Part of its charm is keeping you off kilter, forcing you to hit a 300-yard drive with pinpoint precision one second, then solve a murder mystery the next. A continual delight to play, Golf Story is a breath of fresh air for sports, and another fun story to follow for role-playing fanatics. » **Andrew Reiner**


What we witnessed today was complete disrespect for the sport, and deceit at the highest level.
2
1
3

The writing is quite sharp, blending humor with over-the-top antics



Putting doesn't offer much in terms of gameplay or difficulty

Super Mario Odyssey

A clever tip of the hat

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer PLATINUM

Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Platforming **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** October 27 **Rating** E10+

9.75

When it comes to Nintendo's stable of iconic characters, the Switch is off to an amazing start. The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild launched to a chorus of "best ever" proclamations, and similar sentiment will undoubtedly (and rightfully) be showered upon Super Mario Odyssey. Where Breath of the Wild reinvented the Zelda experience, Odyssey is more of a structural sequel, reacquainting gamers with the rambunctious, free-form 3D play coined in Super Mario 64, but in a much bigger way than we've seen before.

Performing a triple-jump maneuver is a clear reference to the 64-bit heritage, as the animation and timing are nearly identical, but these elements are just the tip of the iceberg in what is easily Mario's biggest and most adventurous game to date. I'd argue that the former plumber isn't even the star of this game; that honor goes to Cappy, his new symbiotic hat that does most of the work for combat and exploration. Cappy is a ghostly entity gifted with the power of possession. When this living hat latches onto an enemy's head, Mario becomes that foe, and the player controls it.

This strange idea pays off handsomely in all avenues of play, allowing Mario to transform into more than 50 different beings, each offering unique abilities and traversal moves. Whether I was charging ahead confidently as a full-sized Tyrannosaurus rex or stretching dangerously across lava fields as an expanding caterpillar (named Tropical Wiggler), I enjoyed each transformation almost equally – a testament to Odyssey delivering on design, functionality, and variety.

The entire experience centers on the concept of discovery. Mario is typically known for platforming, but Odyssey is more about the freedom of exploration, and letting players plot their own course through over a dozen sizeable worlds. The open-ended design works well, as destinations and secrets are littered everywhere. To reach one area, you may need to chain together a specific series of moves with perfect timing, whereas another area may be reachable from numerous vectors. In embracing player ingenuity, Odyssey makes you feel clever – an empowering part of the experience that doesn't diminish at any point during play.

Mario is still fleet of foot and challenged to a variety of linear platforming exercises along the way, but the bulk of the experience is becoming a treasure hunter to find hundreds of moons – a staggering number of collectibles. A few of these moons are easy to find, such as butt-slamming a glowing clump of land to dislodge it, but most are hidden or delivered as a reward at the end of a challenge sequence. Even if your exploration doesn't produce a moon, you may find a different secret, such as a purple coin or a unique transformation. The reward loop is extravagant, and continues well after the credits roll. A wealth of post-game content appears in each world, including a boss rush and more challenging platforming sequences. If you pride yourself as a completionist, you have your work cut out for you.

Each world brings distinct surprises. A number of challenge types are repeated throughout, but Nintendo does a nice job of changing up their dynamics or elevating their difficulty. Each world's visual style is a refreshing change from the last, ranging from element-based regions to a kingdom made almost entirely out of food. I enjoyed exploring, but found the water-based areas to be the weakest of the bunch. Swimming has always been a little unwieldy in Mario games, and this aspect of Odyssey lags behind the rest of the experience, feeling somewhat archaic.

Even by the time I collected my last moon, I felt like I was still getting better at controlling Mario and discovering new techniques. His moveset is deeper than we've seen before, allowing for a high level of nuance. Adding a perfectly timed curve to a hat throw, running and lunging into a roll to achieve greater speed, and hopping gently to bounce off of your hat and onto a wall are just a few of the maneuvers that are beautifully sewn into the mix.

I was floored by the creativity accompanying most of Odyssey, but I didn't like the Roving Racer challenges. These are on-foot sprints against Koopa Troopers where every second counts. I was irked by the racers walking through enemies and walls without penalty – almost appearing to be a bug in a game that is otherwise nearly flawless in its execution.

Super Mario Odyssey is an absolute delight, and another Switch release that will have Nintendo fans debating which 3D Mario game is the best of them all. I still hang my hat on Super Mario Galaxy being the pinnacle of the series, but Odyssey and its wealth of gameplay styles and moons make it a close second. » **Andrew Reiner**

Switch

» **Concept**
A lengthy and challenging Mario adventure that blends platforming with exploration

» **Graphics**
Nintendo doesn't shy away from mixing detailed realism with exaggerated cartoons. This hybrid art style makes for a strange-yet-cool journey through distinct worlds

» **Sound**
Fans are in for a treat, with memorable melodies dating back to Mario's earliest days. The new music is also catchy, making for one of Nintendo's better scores

» **Playability**
Easy to pick up and play, but loaded with enough depth to keep you going until the credits roll. Mario and all of his transformations are a blast to control

» **Entertainment**
With hundreds of moons to collect and a dizzying number of secrets to unearth, Mario Odyssey is a monster of a game that rarely dips in the fun department

» **Replay Value**
High

7.5 Etrian Odyssey V: Beyond The Myth

Platform 3DS **Release** October 17 **Rating** T

Etrian Odyssey V feels close to what the series has done before, but the new classes and skills keep things from getting too dull. **– Kimberley Wallace**

8 Life Is Strange: Before The Storm – Brave New World

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** October 19 **Rating** M

It draws you in with interesting characters, then builds them through quiet moments and big decisions. Even knowing the eventual fate of Chloe and Rachel, I am eager to see how the next (final) episode of this arc explores their legacy in Arcadia Bay. **– Joe Juba**

7.5 Fire Emblem Warriors

Platform Switch **Release** October 20 **Rating** T

As straightforward as the gameplay is, it's given the appropriate amount of spectacle to make the experience fun, especially if you're invested in the characters from the series. **– Javy Gwaltney**

8.25 Gundam Versus

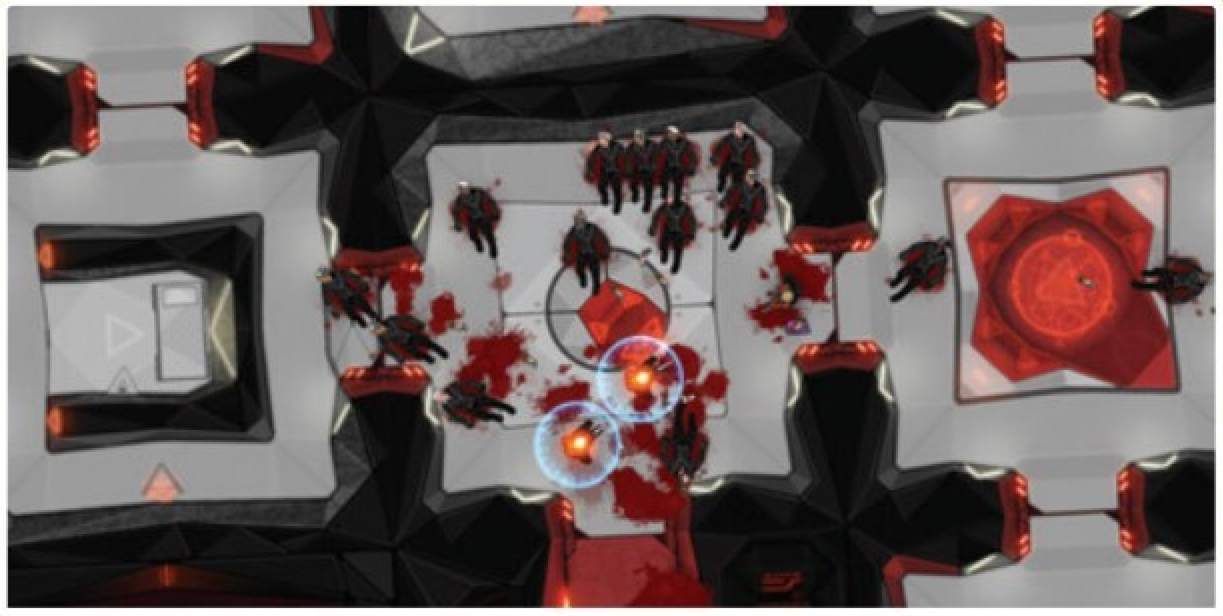
Platform PS4 **Release** September 29 **Rating** T

The combat is a great blend of reverent, fast-paced, and precise, and while solo players may be disappointed in how unsatisfying the single-player is, those who've spent years building their own stories with action figures will find a lot to love. **– Suriel Vazquez**

8 Hob

Platform PS4, PC **Release** September 26 **Rating** T

Each conquered dungeon feels like a mini triumph as you watch the desolate and dying world come back to life, and I loved the sense of wonder and each "a-ha" moment of discovery. Even after I finished the main story of Hob, I was excited to jump back in and search for more secrets hidden within the world. **– Brian Shea**



8.5 Heat Signature

Platform PC **Release** September 21 **Rating** NA

It can be terrifying, empowering, and heartbreaking, all in a single mission. The learning curve is steep, but once you break through, you arrive somewhere in a blissful middle ground between action and strategy. **– Kyle Hilliard**

7 Another Lost Phone: Laura's Story

Platform PC, iOS, Android **Release** September 21 **Rating** M

Another Lost Phone: Laura's Story is an inventive approach that takes inspiration from its predecessor, A Normal Lost Phone. This spiritual successor features an all-new story, where you search through a stranger's phone to piece together an intriguing story, but it's let down by uninspiring puzzles and characters that fall flat. **– Elise Favis**

7.75 Battle Chasers: Nightwar

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** October 3 **Rating** T

The balancing problems create an uneven play experience, which is disappointing considering the good things this stylish RPG has to offer. Airship Syndicate's gorgeous art design and fluid animations are a wonder to watch, and Nightwar's overcharge ability system offers a layer of strategy that is often missing from turn-based RPGs. **– Ben Reeves**

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Path of Exile: Fall of Oriath	9.5	Nov-17
Pro Evolution Soccer 2018	8.75	Nov-17
Slime Rancher	8.5	Oct-17
Sonic Mania	8.5	Oct-17
XCOM 2: War of the Chosen	9.25	Oct-17

SWITCH

Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle	8.5	Oct-17
NBA 2K18	7.5	Nov-17
Sonic Mania	8.5	Oct-17

PC

Absolver	6.75	Nov-17
Danganronpa V3: Killing Harmony	7	Nov-17
Dishonored: Death of the Outsider	8.5	Nov-17
Divinity: Original Sin II	9.75	Nov-17
FIFA 18	8.75	Nov-17
Guardians of the Galaxy: Episode 3 – More Than A Feeling	7.75	Nov-17
Last Day of June	7	Nov-17
Life is Strange: Before the Storm – Awake	8	Nov-17
Marvel vs. Capcom: Infinite	8.25	Nov-17
NASCAR Heat 2	7	Nov-17
NBA 2K18	9	Nov-17
Observer	9	Oct-17
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Ys VIII: Lacrimosa of Dana	8.25	Nov-17

3DS

Metroid: Samus Returns	9.75	Nov-17
Monster Hunter Stories	8	Nov-17

iOS

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PLAYSTATION VR

Sparc	7	Nov-17

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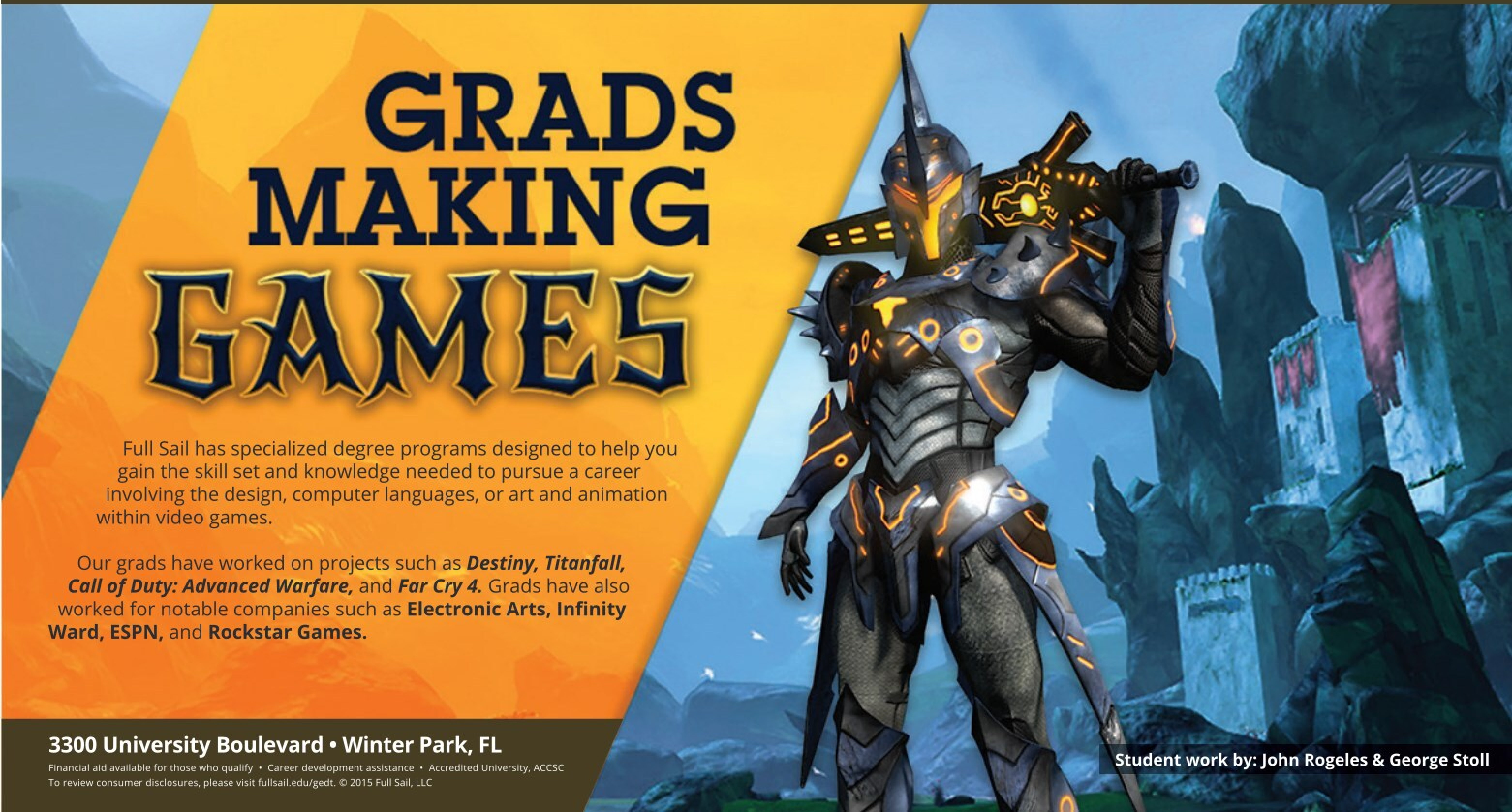

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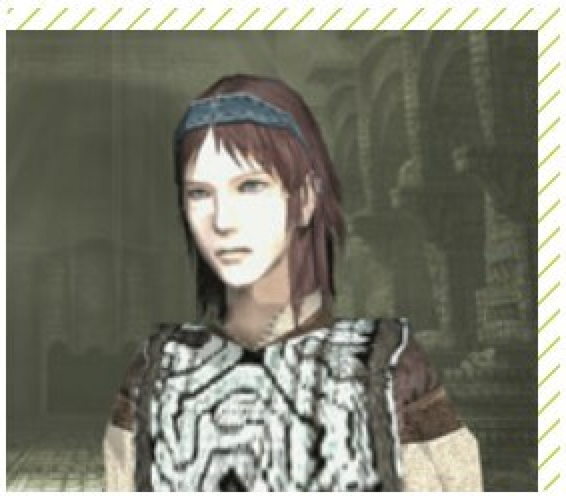
Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll

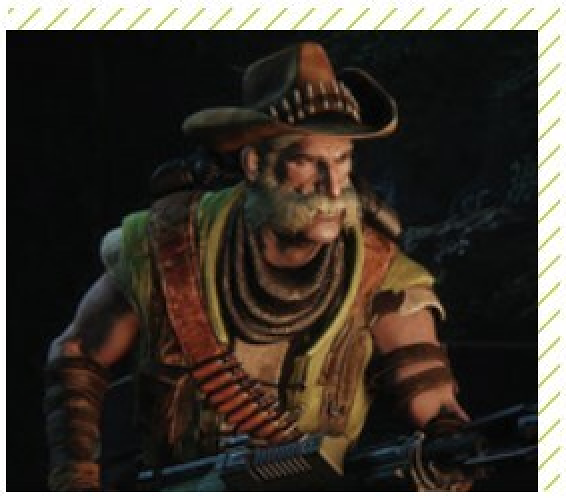
Playing The Monster Match

Monster Hunter may have nabbed the highly explanatory name for its title, but it is far from the only game that involves people going after monsters. See if you can match the hunters to their prey below.

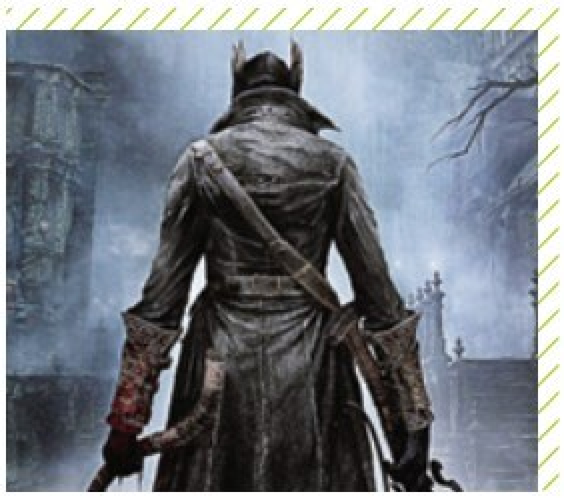
by Kyle Hilliard



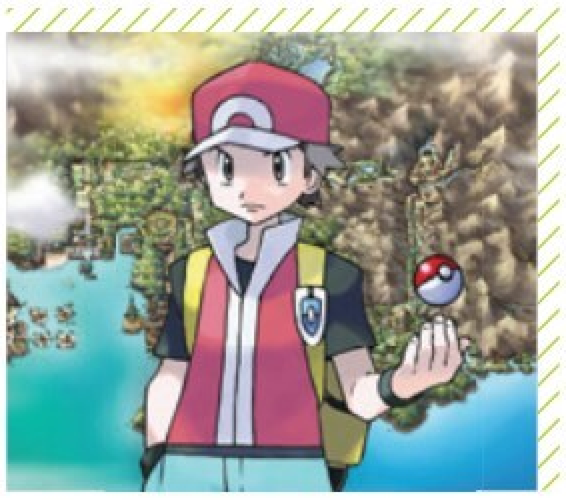
1. Wander
(Shadow of the Colossus)



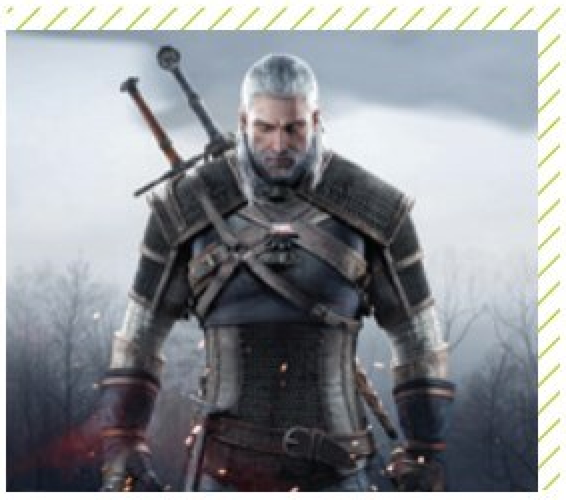
2. Griffin Hallsey (Evolve)



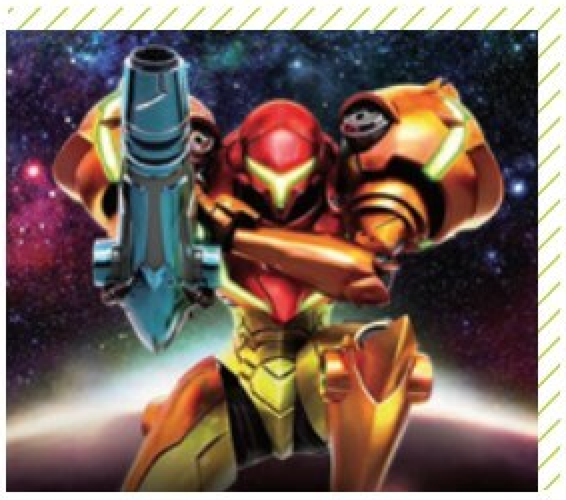
3. Hunter (Bloodborne)



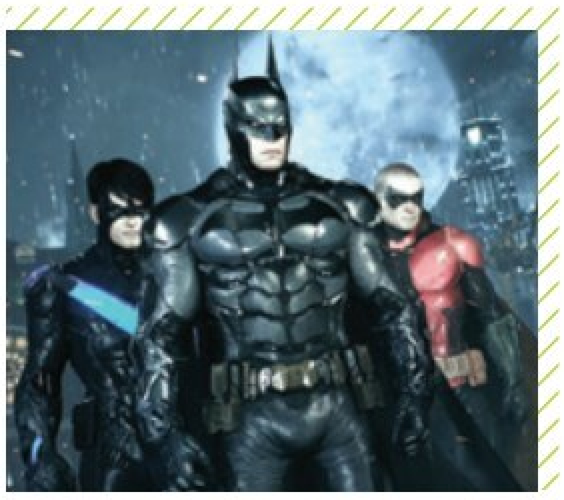
4. Trainer (Pokémon)



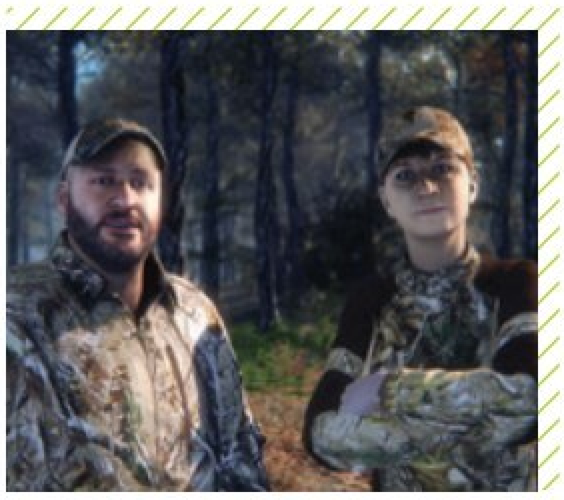
5. Geralt of Rivia
(The Witcher)



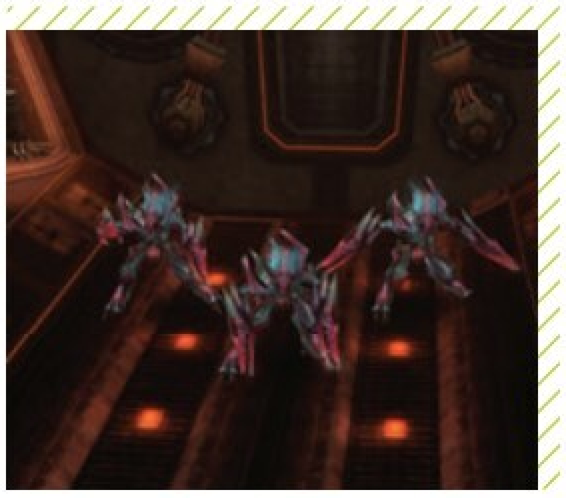
6. Samus (Metroid)



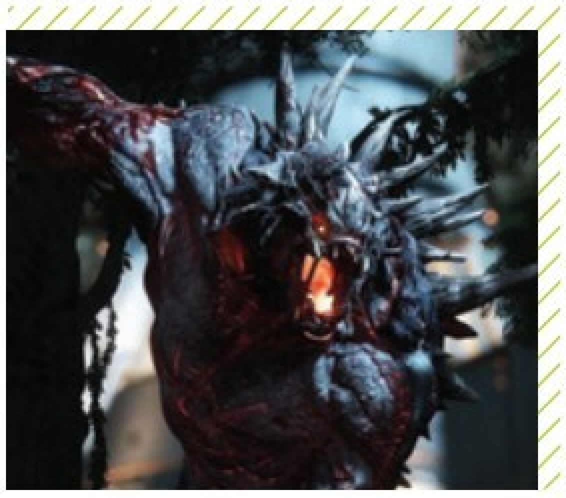
7. Batman
(Batman: Arkham Knight)



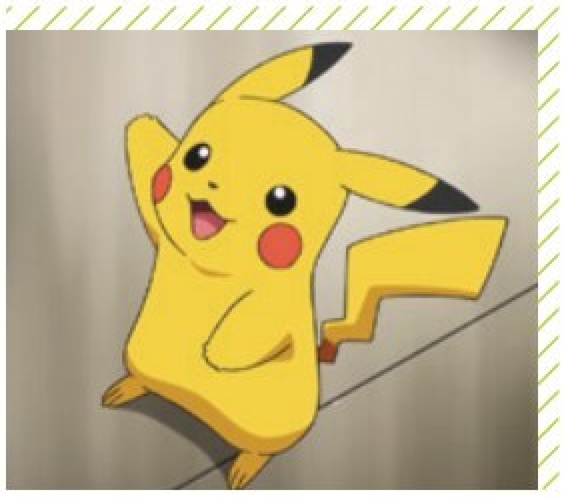
8. Hunter (Cabela's Big Game Hunter: Pro Hunts)



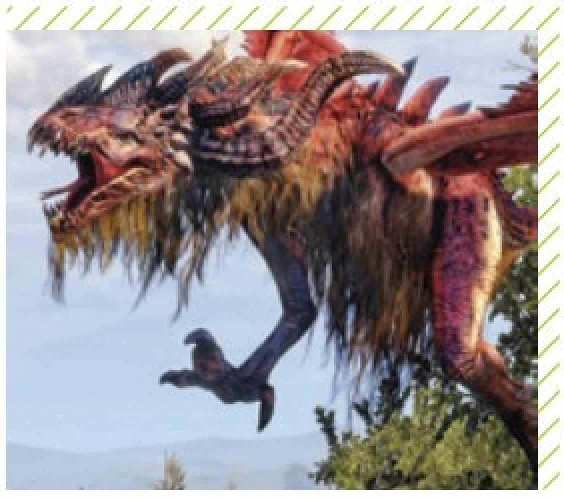
A. Space Pirate



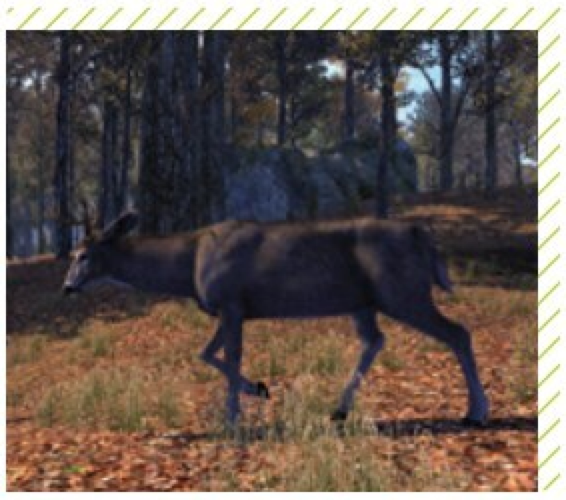
B. Goliath



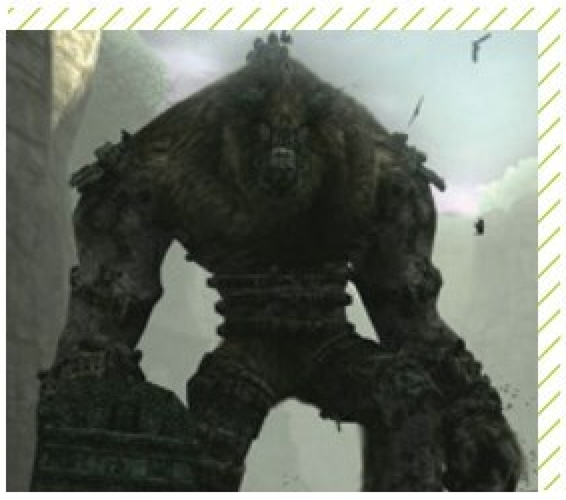
C. Pikachu



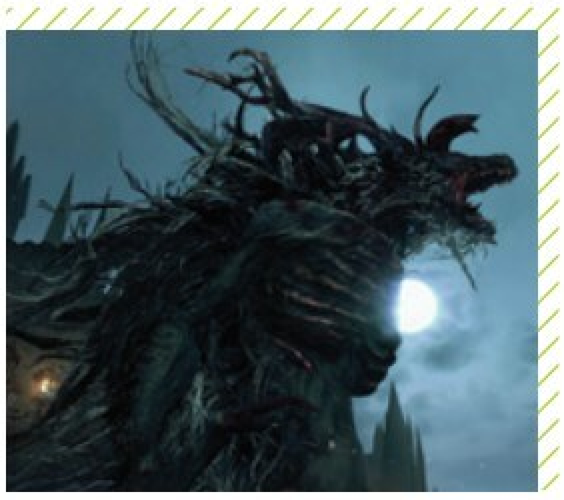
D. Saesenthessis the Dragon



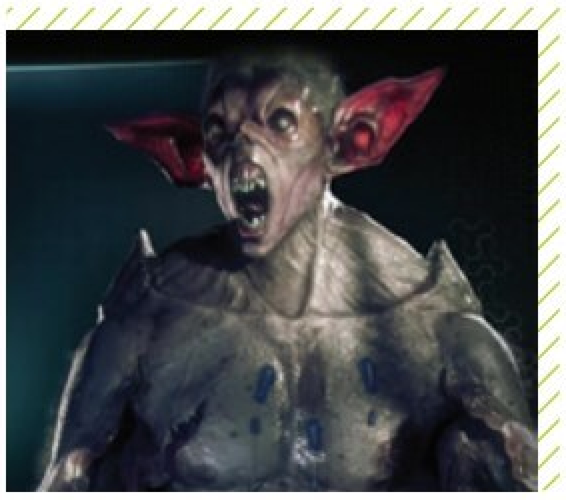
E. Deer



F. Valus



G. Cleric Beast



H. Manbat

Answers: 1.F 2.B 3.G 4.C 5.D 6.A 7.H 8.E

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